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All Stories Complete

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SOMEBODY WANTS YOU DEAD (Short Novel—28,000).....by Robert Moore Williams... 8

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Huddled together in the darkened hotel, the terrified guests waited as Death stalked the night.

NOTHING BUT TROUBLE (Novelette—20,000).....by Robert Martin..... 56

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He saw the world through the bottom of a bottle . . . the view was one of hatred and sudden death.

MURDER MAKES ME MAD (Novelette—15,000).....by Maurice Sachs..... 140

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When an ordinary working guy gets tied up with murder, his reactions may not be what you expect.

SEWER MUSIC (Short-short—1,000).....by Mayo Fidler..... 164

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He knew what kind of music they would play at his funeral: a tragic air from the depths of despair.

.....

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OFF THE BLOTTER

ABOUT this time of the month, all pages of the current issue of MAMMOTH DETECTIVE have gone to the printers in galley form, have been made up by them into page form and returned for okays, and presses are ready to roll.

ALL pages, that is, except one: "Off the Blotter," page 6. Usually the editor puts off doing that one until the very last, principally because he is inherently lazy and doing that page requires thinking out, and typing, seventy-five lines of fifty characters each. That is labor; not much, of course, but actually more than any other part of the magazine requires. As a matter of fact, the reason he puts a cartoon (see foot of column) on the page at all is to lessen by twenty-five the number of lines he must write.

NOT that writing those lines is going to require much thought. The editor will simply say something nice about each story, in the corresponding order in which they appear on the contents page. He will (a) say it is by an author you (the reader) are crazy about, (b) that it is any excellent yarn and will have you writing in

a long letter of praise, and (c) a "teaser" phrase will be included to get you to read the story. Just do this the amount of times there are stories, add a hint of what next month is to bring . . . and "Off the Blotter"—or as we on the magazine call it—"Off the Bladder," is written.

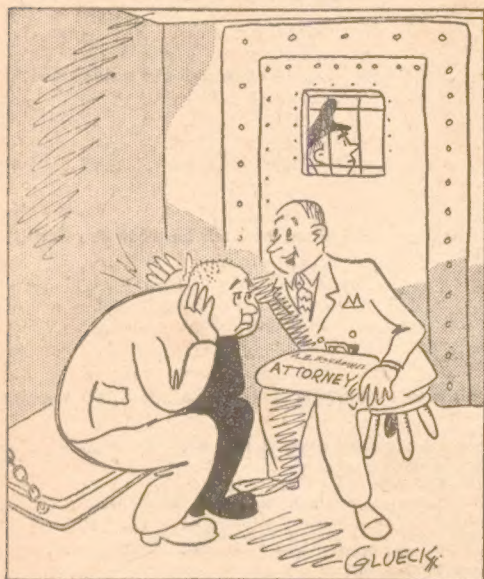
JUST for the sheer novelty of being honest, this time we're going to tell you about the stories the way we usually regard them. Let's start off with Robert Moore Williams' yarn, "Somebody Wants You Dead." Originally the story had a much better title but an editor must show his writers he's much smarter than they are, so the thing gets a new title. We had a hard time reading it—corn from beginning to end! Filled with short sentences that enabled the author to give us a padded word count. But it's filled with action and if you're not too fussy you can probably manage to wade through it.

NEXT is "Nothing But Trouble," by Robert Martin. Mr. Martin is one of the few writers in the book we don't know personally, so we have to speak of him respectfully. The story is full of guns and blackjacks and a few beautiful babes—stuff you find in darn near any detective story. But this one has a snake in it too; maybe that's why we bought it. There doesn't seem to be any other reason. . . .

THAT brings you up to "You Smoke Too Much." Now what kind of title is that for a detective story? Some more of your editor's work. Probably no other magazine in the country would have bought this one, but H. B. Hickey is a friend of ours and we couldn't let the poor guy starve. It's about a bum who picked up a cigar and trapped a killer for a crime he didn't commit. Who'd buy, let alone read, a silly yarn like that?

THEN there's "To Die Dreaming," by John H. Knox. This hurts us. Here's a peach of a story that should have gone into a slick magazine for more money than we paid for it. It has a good plot and characters you'll remember for ten or fifteen minutes after you finish the story. That doesn't happen often in these pages.

"MURDER Makes Me Mad," by Maurice Sachs, finishes the book this month. It almost finished us. —H.B.



"Well, it's all over but the shooting!"

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of the Viderm formulas, complete with full directions, and packed in a safety-sealed carton. On delivery, pay two dollars plus postage. If you wish, you can save the postage fee by mailing the two dollars with your letter. Then, if you aren't thrilled with results, your money will be cheerfully refunded. Remember that both of the formulas you use have been fully tested and proven, and are reliable for you. If they don't help you, your treatments cost you nothing. After you have received your Viderm, if you have any questions to ask concerning abused skin, just send them in.



When the light picked out the child's figure, he knew he dare not shoot.

Somebody Wants You Dead

by Robert Moore Williams

***Just a peaceful vacation spot high in the
Rockies . . . until a group of desperate men came
to give murder as payment for a mysterious box***

THERE was a snuffling sound in the willows growing on the bank of the trout stream.

Zack Gray, letting his fly line float on the surface of the pool, heard it.

It came again.

Snuffle, snuffle, snuffle.

Sounds like a thirsty dog drinking water, he thought. Like a terribly thirsty dog. Like a dog that hasn't had a drink in weeks, like a dog so terribly thirsty he slobbers in the water because he can't drink fast enough.

He watched the willows. Gnats danced above their tops in the late afternoon dusk. The willows were still. The sound did not come again.

Back on the gravel bar at the head of the pool his portable radio was playing.

"Onsey, twosey, I love yousey—" a girl sang. The sound was weak. Maybe the radio waves didn't get over the mountains, he thought, glancing at the high peaks around him. Or maybe the big cloud in the west had something to do with the radio's reduced volume.

To the west, the cloud filled the mountain gap. It went right up into the sky, a growing mass of blackness that threatened to darken the whole world. Looking at it, he estimated he

would have to be back at the lodge in an hour if he didn't want to get soaking wet.

He retrieved the fly line, flicked it down the pool again. Out of the corners of his eyes he warily watched the willows. They were thick and tall and green.

Ahead of the approaching storm the air was hot and still, a heavy oppressive mass without motion. In this airless void, the top of one of the willows was shaking.

While he watched, another willow nearer the bank, began to shake.

Then a third one started to tremble.

The willows were about eight feet high. They formed a thick green hedge beside the trout stream.

Something—something that snuffled like a mad dog slobbering in a pool of water—was forcing its way through the willows.

The sound came again.

Snuffle, snuffle, snuffle.

The sound raised the hair along the back of the big man's close-cropped head. It lifted cold bumps of flesh all over his body.

At the edge of the stream, the willows suddenly parted. A slender white arm fumbled its way through them. A face

looked out of the opening thus created.

Dirt grimed the face. Tangled hair fell over it. Blood running from a gash in the forehead trickled down and around the eyes and down the cheeks.

It was the face of a woman.

Even through the grime and the blood and the tangled hair, Zack Gray could tell it was a woman's face.

It stared at him. The mouth worked. The slobbering sound came again.

For an instant, the big man seemed turned to stone. This—this Medusa gibbering at him out of the willows—was horrible enough to paralyze the mind. For an instant he could not move. But only for an instant.

DRIPPING his fly rod, he almost knocked the trout pool dry as he splashed across the stream. He kicked the willows aside.

The face turned and stared up at him. There was terror in the eyes.

The face tried to draw away.

He dropped to his knees.

"What's happened to you?" he demanded.

Snuffle, snuffle, snuffle.

She was crying. The sound he had heard in the willows, the whimpering snuffle like a dog drinking water, had been the sound of this girl crying. It was not like any cry he had ever heard before in his life.

"What happened to you?" he repeated hoarsely.

Snuffle.

Her blouse was torn almost from her body. Her skirt was ripped. She had lost one of her hiking shoes.

"Where are you hurt?"

The fear of him was going out of her eyes. The presence of this big man was reaching through her dazed mind and she was realizing he wasn't another tormentor. But she couldn't speak. She lay on her back and stared at him and

made snuffling noises.

He ran one arm under her shoulders and another arm under her knees and started to lift her. She had to have help, she had to have help fast. Several doctors were vacationing at the lodge. If he could get her there, they would be able to help her.

Pain galvanized her body as he started to lift her. She jerked. He could feel her muscles twist and jump.

For the first time, he saw the gash in her back.

A knife had made that gash. A knife had been driven into her back. It had entered on the left side.

Blood was still oozing from the wound. As he moved her, it began to spurt weakly.

He hastily laid her down.

She shivered.

He knew what was happening right before his eyes, knew he was powerless to prevent it.

She was going to die.

She *was* dying.

He wished he knew prayers for the dying, so he could say them. That was all anybody could do for her now.

"What happened, girl? What happened to you?"

Snuffle, snuffle.

"Dear God—" Gray choked.

She pawed at him. She grabbed at him as though in this last desperate moment she was trying to reach out and grab a friendly hand which might pull her back from the abyss yawning in front of her.

The touch of a friendly hand at the time of passing. Was that what she wanted? Someone to help her gently into death's dark presence.

He took her hand. The fingers were clenched shut. They opened.

A thin key slid into his hand. He took it, looked at her.

"Do you want me to have this?"

She nodded.

"What is it?"

Snuffle.

The willows that had been aside quivered in response to the quivering of her body. She looked at Zack Gray, then looked past him. Her eyes fixed themselves on the far-away sky, blue ahead of the black masses of thunder clouds rising in the west.

The far-away sky—

This was the last sight she saw on earth, the far-away sky, blue ahead of the coming storm.

She died as he bent over her again.

Her death tightened muscles all over his body, tightened coiled springs in his mind. Who had driven the knife into the back of this girl? And why?

She was a slender little thing. Her legs were as thin as pipe stems. A thin wedding ring showed on her left hand.

Somebody had loved her. The ring proved that. But what trail had she followed that ended so horribly in the willows beside the trout stream almost in sight of the ultra-exclusive Rocky Mountain Lodge?

SHE lay there among the willows, still and quiet, her haggard, grimed face peaceful now that she was actually in death's dark presence. Zack Gray looked at her. Something about her seemed familiar. Moved by a sudden impulse, he opened his billfold.

He took a photograph out of it.

It was a snapshot, a picture that might have been taken with a two-dollar camera.

The snapshot showed a slender girl standing beside a hot-dog stand.

Gray looked from the photograph to the girl on the ground, then back to the photo. After a long scrutiny, he nodded.

"It looks like I've found Ruth Shaw," he said to himself.

He knew Ruth Shaw was staying at the lodge. A five-dollar bill slipped to the desk clerk had gotten this information without question. He had wired Grimsby that she was here. But he hadn't actually seen her until now.

Now he had found her.

His face was grim. "But somebody else found her before I did."

He had followed Ruth Shaw from Chicago to St. Louis and from St. Louis to Denver and from Denver to the snooty Rocky Mountain Lodge.

He was a private detective; he got paid for following and finding people. He had never managed to catch up with Ruth Shaw in the month during which he had been following her. Always she had stayed just a jump ahead of him, always when he got her located he found she had just moved on.

She had stopped moving now.

He had found her, found her in the willows beside a trout stream, found her with life bubbling out of her back.

Who was she?

He didn't know. She had worked in Grimsby's office. She had left. Of her own will, Grimsby had said. But certain confidential papers were missing. Grimsby thought she might know where they were. That was why he wanted her found.

"Just find her," Grimsby had said. "Then wire me."

Well, he found her.

He stood up.

Over across the willows a man ducked down.

Zack Gray caught just a glimpse of the man. The fellow was a hundred yards away. He might be as guest of the hotel out taking a walk in the evening air. There were paths through the willows and around the lake above the beaver dam, paths laid out by the lodge so the summer people might walk and see the wonders of nature close at

hand. There were paths for miles around the lodge.

The fellow might be a guest walking on one of the paths.

Looking down at the body, Zack Gray knew he might be something else too.

He might be the man who killed Ruth Shaw.

GRAY didn't take a second look. He splashed across the stream, heading for the gravel bar where he had left the expensive portable radio that he had brought with him.

They were still singing about love on the radio. He could hear them singing about it. Just as he reached the gravel bar, they stopped singing. The voice of the announcer cut in.

"We interrupt this program to bring you an important news flash. Charles Eggstrom, convicted murderer, escaped from the death cell in a daring prison break about noon today. The killer is known to be armed and he is thought to have the assistance of accomplices. Roads have been blocked and a highway net thrown up. Police officials are confident that Eggstrom will be apprehended shortly. We will bring you further bulletins as they come in over our exclusive wires—"

Zack Gray wasted no time listening to the radio. The fact that some killer had escaped from the penitentiary didn't mean a thing to him. The killer over there in the willows was a damned sight more important.

Unlocking the side panel of the radio, he jerked it open. Nestled on a spring clip that he had fitted inside the cabinet was his gun, a thirty-eight caliber revolver. A radio was a good place to keep a gun. No one would think of looking for it there.

He checked to make certain the weapon was loaded. Then, pistol in hand,

he splashed back across the stream and climbed up on the bank.

The second man was hidden in the willows not ten feet away. Zack Gray didn't, couldn't, see him. What Gray saw first was the round angry muzzle of the tommy-gun poking out through the mass of green shrubbery.

"Drop th' gat!" a voice snarled at him. "Drop th' gat before I blow you in two!"

CHAPTER II

THE driver of the Rocky Mountain Lodge station wagon was inclined to be snooty at first. The lodge was full, the cabins were full, the management was thinking of putting up tents on the golf course to accommodate the overflow of guests that wanted to stay at the resort. Under these circumstances it seemed doubtful that this girl knew what she was talking about when she told him to take her to the lodge.

"But I have a reservation," she insisted.

The driver grinned. They all said that. Reservations could be had, of course. Fifty for the reservation clerk would almost always find a room. Twenty for the driver of the station wagon wasn't a bad way to start looking for a reservation. It showed your heart was in the right place and it revealed you had plenty of bucks in your pocket.

This girl standing on the railroad platform did not seem to know how to flash a twenty dollar bill.

"That is, I don't have the reservation," she continued. "My sister made it. She wired me to meet her here."

"Yes, miss," the driver said.

"Her name is Shaw," the girl said. "Ruth Shaw. I'm Sally Shaw," she said impulsively.

There was a smile on her face as she

spoke.

The smile did it. It was the kind of a smile that has been changing the minds of station wagon drivers, bank presidents, industrial tycoons, presidents, and emperors, since the world began. Eve in the Garden of Eden, Eve before she learned the need of fig leaves, smiled like this.

A few of her favorite daughters have always inherited touches of it.

Sally Shaw had it.

The driver decided there were other things in life than twenty dollar bills.

He opened the door of the station wagon. A neat pair of legs swished past his eyes. She watched him put her baggage in.

She had bought the new bag for this trip. The metal box was in the new bag.

The box Ruth had sent her.

The box Ruth had asked her to bring to the lodge.

It was a flat, oblong box made of steel, the type that is used to hold securities. Only, she thought, there weren't any securities in it. Ruth, of course, didn't need a box to hold her stocks and bonds.

Ruth was a filing clerk.

Ruth didn't own any stocks or bonds.

So there couldn't be securities in the box. Then what was in it?

Sally didn't know. Ruth hadn't sent the key.

Ruth had just sent the box and two hundred dollars in cash and a hasty note begging Sally to meet her and to bring the box.

It was all very thrilling and mysterious, she thought. But, of course, Ruth would explain about the box. And she would explain why she had quit her job in Chicago and how she happened to be traveling and how she was able to stay at a place like the Rock Mountain Lodge and where she had got the two hundred dollars.

Ruth would explain all these things.

She hadn't seen her big sister in three years.

They would have a lot to talk about.

Up in the front seat, the driver was trying to flirt with her. She wondered why all men tried to flirt with her. Was there something wrong with her? Was she brazen or forward? Did she look easy?

She didn't know what it was but she had learned she had to be careful about smiling at men. As soon as she smiled at a man, he started making passes at her. He started talking about a vine-covered cottage, or dinner for two, or a week-end.

Eventually they always got around to talking about a week-end somewhere.

"STORM in the mountains," the driver said.

He pointed to a cloud-filled gap between two massive granite peaks.

She could see the black clouds forming in the gap.

"Do you have bad storms here?" she asked.

"Not often," the driver answered. "Sometimes, though, she really turns loose. There! If you look close you can see the lodge."

They were on top of a ridge. The little town where she had left the train was miles behind.

Across a sweeping willow-filled valley, where a little stream had been dammed in to several small lakes, she could see the sprawling expanse of the Rock Mountain Lodge. In front of it, sloping down to the willows, were the green fairways of the golf course.

She thrilled at the sight.

"It's very beautiful," she said.

"Most people think it is," the driver agreed. "We got horseback riding and golf and tennis and swimming and hiking and trout fishing—"

"Is—" She hesitated. "Is it terribly expensive?"

"Twenty dollars a day," the driver said.

"Oh."

"And up," he added.

She was silent. Two hundred dollars wouldn't last long here. Only she didn't have the two hundred any more. She had spent almost half of it for clothes.

She wondered why Ruth had selected such an expensive place to stay.

The station wagon slid down the winding trail to the bottom of the ridge and dived nose first into the gravel road crossing the bottom. Willows raced by on both sides of the car.

The fresh mountain air blew in a cool stream through the open windows. Ruth would love this clean cool air. Ruth would love the mountains.

Ruth had always wanted to go to the mountains and stay at a swell place and have breakfast in bed and live like a queen for a while. Even if only for a couple of days.

She thought how thrilled Ruth was to be able to come here. Swimming, tennis, horseback riding. Only Ruth didn't look good in a bathing suit and she couldn't play tennis and it was doubtful if she could ride a horse.

It would be fun to try to do these things anyhow. They could pretend they had played tennis every day of their lives and that they had their own private stable and went riding every morning before breakfast.

She thrilled at the thought. It would be fun!

Off above the tops of the willows on the left she saw a sudden puff of smoke.

The report of the gun was muffled by the hum of the station wagon over the road. She caught only a faint echo of it. She sat up.

"Somebody fired a shot over there

in the willows," she said.

The driver glanced nonchalantly in the direction she indicated. "Some of the guests," he said. "They like to get off somewhere and shoot off guns. It makes them think they're real he-men when they can shoot a gun."

The car sped on. Sally Shaw sank back on the luxurious leather cushions and enjoyed the pleasure of the ride. Almost before she knew it, they were at the front entrance of the lodge. The driver was taking her bags out of the car and was directing her to the reservation clerk.

THE reservation clerk was a little tougher than the station wagon driver had been. He was absolutely certain he didn't have a reservation for Sally Shaw.

"Sorry, miss. I don't have anything for anyone by that name."

He was a fifty dollar man, was this sleek clerk with the flower in the buttonhole of his tailored jacket.

"But I'm positive my sister made the reservation. She came on ahead of me—"

She was holding the smile in reserve. She didn't like to use it. She knew its power.

He shook his head. "We're full up." So she had to use the smile.

Five minutes later a grinning porter was carrying her bags out to one of the cottages.

They were extra special, were these cottages clustered around the main lodge. Extra special and extra expensive. In the cottages you could smell pine trees and sit on the front porch and see the sun go down and imagine you were living all alone somewhere out in the wild and woolly west.

She opened the door herself.

"Ruth!" she called out. "Ruth—"

The words died in her throat. A

woman was occupying this cottage. That much was certain. Her clothes and her bags were here.

The clothes were scattered all over the floor. The bags had been pulled out of the closet and were open. The drawers of the dresser were open. Their contents had been pulled out.

The bellboy cast a speculative eye over the condition of the cottage.

"It looks like somebody has been rummaging around," he said.

Fear laid an icy finger on her heart. Just one finger. "Ruth!" she called again.

There was no answer.

"You want me to report this to the manager?" the bellboy questioned.

"Yes," she answered quickly, then as quickly changed her mind. "No. I guess not. Perhaps my sister did this herself. She might have been looking for something—"

She was protecting Ruth. Ruth ought to know that somebody had been in her cabin before they made a report to the management. Ruth might not want the manager to know.

To herself she admitted that Ruth might be hiding something. "As soon as I find my sister, I'll let you know," she said.

She gave the bellboy a quarter. To her, it seemed a big tip. He was nice enough to thank her, though not for the quarter. He thanked her because she was one of Eve's daughters. The door closed behind him.

She was alone in the cabin.

A wind, blowing from the coming storm, pushed at the curtains. Dusk was falling. The thin mountain air was already heavy with shadow. The sun was gone behind the thick mass of clouds that lay to the west.

"Ruth," she called again. "Where are you, Ruth?"

She heard the door creak. It was a

little sound, a tiny noise. She thought her sister was coming. She turned quickly toward the front door.

"Ruth—"

The front door was closed. It was shut tight.

But she had heard—

The sound came again. It came from the bathroom door. Fear clutched at her as she turned.

The bathroom door was open.

A hatchet-faced, beady-eyed youth stood in the door. He was wearing a blue double-breasted suit and he had a blue snap brim hat pulled down over his eyes.

He had a gun in his hand.

"Here she is, Ike," he said, over his shoulder.

She was paralyzed. She watched him step into the room. A second youth followed him. They advanced toward her with a certainty that was full of meaning.

She tried to scream but the sound was only a rasp in her frozen throat.

CHAPTER III

"DROP th' gat!" the voice snarled at him. "Drop th' gat before I blow you in two."

The vicious muzzle of the tommy-gun covering him, Zack Gray slowly lowered his hand. The gun slid from his fingers. It slipped between the bent-over willows and landed on the gravel-thickened soil with a soft metallic thud. The eyes behind the tommy-gun watched him with unwavering intensity.

"Turn around."

He turned around.

"No, don't lift your hands. Just stand there and look at the scenery."

He heard the man move. Glancing downward, he saw a hand reach into the willows at his feet and retrieve his gun.

"I got him. And here she is too."

He didn't move. Nobody but an utterly desperate man took a chance with a sub-machine gun.

There were two men. He could hear the second one coming crashing through the bushes.

Gray cursed under his breath. Catching a glimpse of one man, the idea that there might be *two* killers in the willows had not entered his mind.

He heard them conferring in whispers.

"But she ain't got it on her. That's a cinch."

"Then where is it?"

"I don't know where it is. Maybe she hid it somewhere around the lodge. Maybe she already got rid of it. Maybe she dumped it in St. Louis or Denver."

"How in the hell are we going to find it?"

"I don't know. If you hadn't been so fast with that knife—"

"Hell, she was runnin', wasn't she? She was about to get away, wasn't she?"

"I know," the first voice grudgingly said. "But we could have choked it out of her or beat it out—"

"We tried that, didn't we? Did we find out anything?"

"No, damn it!" the second voice swore. "Anyhow we haven't got it and we don't know where it is. And we have got *him*."

Zack Gray felt his skin crawl along his back at the words. They were talking about him now. The words, the tones of their voices, their actions, had already told him that these two men were gangsters, killers, the trigger men of the mob. What mob? That didn't matter. Why were they after Ruth Shaw? That didn't matter either now. She had something that they wanted. They had used torture in an effort to extract the information they were seeking—he remembered the grimy, bloody

face that had peered out at him through the willows.

After enduring their torture, she had tried to run, and a knife had slashed into her back!

Zack Gray fervently wished that tommy-gun was in his hands. Please, God, let me have that gun for just thirty seconds—

God wasn't listening. Gray wondered if God had been listening when Ruth Shaw tried to run through the willows.

"Turn around, you," a voice said in his ear.

HE TURNED. The man with the tommy-gun had a twisted face. Sometime or other in his grimy past someone had broken his jaw. The bone had set crooked with the result that the face was crooked.

The second man had the round, guileless face of a baby. Weak blue eyes stared unwinkingly through folds of flesh.

Broken-jaw saw him memorizing their faces. The agate eyes glinted.

"What are you doin' in this?" Broken-jaw demanded.

"I—" Gray stared at the man. "What am I doing? Nothing. I heard her in the willows—"

He knew he had to convince them that he knew nothing of Ruth Shaw. The fact that he, too, was looking for her would ruin any chance he might have of escaping alive.

"And you went and got a gat?" Broken-jaw said.

He nodded.

"It's damned funny that you would have a gat so handy."

He shrugged. "I was doing a little fishing. I brought the gun in case I ran into a snake."

Broken-jaw hesitated. So far as he was concerned, this man was danger-

ous. This man had seen the body of Ruth Shaw. That fact alone was enough reason to rub him out. Only the added fact that he had a gun so handy made the killer hesitate.

A man who carried a gun ought to be investigated.

"Go through him," he said to his companion.

Baby-face grinned and stepped forward.

Zack Gray offered no resistance. Baby-face felt cautiously under his arm pits, slapped around his waist, and finding no second gun, pulled his jacket open and reached into the inside pocket. He found a bill fold and a plain white envelope which contained a photograph. He handed both to Broken-jaw.

There was nothing in the bill fold but a couple of hundred dollars. Expense money that Grimsby had wired him.

The money wasn't important. They couldn't identify it. His driver's license and identification card would show he was a resident of Chicago but they would reveal nothing more. The photostat of his license as a private detective was in his room back at the lodge.

He was in the clear so far as the bill fold was concerned.

Broken-jaw reached the same conclusion. His face revealed it. He opened the envelope, glanced at the photograph.

Instantly his beady eyes were fixed on Zack Gray.

"What's this picture doing in your pocket?"

"She had it," the detective answered. He nodded toward the huddled body lying in the willows.

"She had it?" Broken-jaw gasped. He glanced at his companion.

"It was down inside her bra," the detective continued. "When I started to pick her up, it fell out. Since I thought

it might be useful in identifying her, I picked it up."

He tried to put conviction in the tones of his voice. A lot of girls carried snaps of themselves. Ruth Shaw had been carrying her own photograph. It had fallen out of her dress and he had picked it up. What was more likely than that?

"That's a lie," the baby-faced thug spoke. "She didn't have no picture stuck inside her dress. I looked."

Broken-jaw's eyes came back to the detective's face.

Zack Gray shrugged. "I don't know what the hell this is all about," he said. "But that's where I found the envelope."

He could feel the sticky sweat on the palms of his hands, he could feel sweat dripping under his arms. He was in mortal peril and he knew it.

He could identify the men who had killed Ruth Shaw.

From their viewpoint, that one fact alone was enough to justify killing him.

No witnesses left alive. That was the code of the gangster. Without witnesses the law was often helpless.

THE storm was beginning to move out of the gap in the mountains. Masses of dark clouds were sliding slowly down the valley.

Out of the corners of his eyes he caught a glimpse of a station wagon coming down the road along the opposite ridge.

It was the station wagon the lodge sent into town to meet the trains.

Far off, he was vaguely aware of the drone of a motor.

Three or four thousand feet in the sky, a helicopter was winging slowly across the valley ahead of the storm. The drone came from the motor of the 'copter.

His attention was so completely con-

centrated on the two men that he barely realized the helicopter was in the sky.

Broken-jaw was thinking. There was an intent frown on his face. He stared at Zack Gray.

"I think," he said slowly, "I think you had better do some talkin'."

Gray shrugged. "I don't know what you mean."

Broken-jaw looked at his companion. "Show him what I mean," he said.

Baby-face stepped forward. He grinned. He was going to enjoy this. Beating hell out of a man gave him the same kind of kick he got out of being with a woman. Maybe a bigger kick.

His knuckles thudded against Zack Gray's jaw.

Gray saw the grin, guessed the perversion behind it, sensed the knuckles coming.

He let his head snap back with the punch. He let himself crumple into the willows.

Baby-face began to kick him. With all his strength he drove the point of his shoe into the detective's ribs.

Zack Gray gasped with pain. He could roll with a punch and evade the power in the blow but there was no way he could avoid the thud of a shoe when he was down.

The blow came again. Baby-face used the heel this time, smashing out and downward, aiming at the stomach.

A flood of flashing red light seared upward through Zack Gray's brain.

Baby-face licked his lips and grinned. This was fun. This was more fun than he had had crushing kittens when he was a kid. More fun even than working on the girl.

He lifted his foot again.

Broken-jaw shoved him aside. Broken-jaw leaned over the detective. "Maybe you want to talk now."

"I don't—" Zack Gray whispered. "I don't know anything. Believe me,

I don't."

Broken-jaw stepped back. He nodded again at his companion.

Thwuck! was the sound of the heel of the shoe.

"Hey!" Broken-jaw shouted.

Zack Gray realized that Baby-face had stopped kicking him. The two men were looking up.

They had seen the helicopter.

Something about the sight of that ship seemed to freeze them in their tracks. The helicopter was high in the air, passing lazily over the valley, but it could not have held their attention better if it had been only fifty feet above them and coming straight down.

Baby-face's jaw had sagged at the sight of the ship. All color had drained out of Broken-jaw's face. Held in a sagging hand, the muzzle of the tommy-gun was pointing up.

Zack Gray raised himself on his haunches. Like a battering ram he drove his head into Broken-jaw's belly.

The tommy-gun spurted lead.

CHAPTER IV

SHE tried to scream but the sound was only a rasp in her frozen throat.

The two youths slid into the room. They stared at her. The second one nudged his companion.

"She ain't the one, Joe."

Joe was the beady-eyed one in the double-breasted blue suit. She saw his eyes go over her. They made her skin creep, did those eyes. They were beady, crawling things. They left her face and went down over her rounded body and a kind of hot glow formed in them.

She found her voice. "What are you two men doing here?"

Joe continued to look at her. He shook his head. "You got it right, Ike. She ain't the one." He grinned. "But look at them curves, Ike, look at them

curves."

Ike looked. There was a trace of a scaley rash on Ike's face. It was a little thing, a slight reddening of the skin, with a few small pimples here and there. Most people would not have noticed it, but in the Army one sight of it would have instantly landed him a hospital ward for investigation and a blood check.

Ike wasn't in the Army. Ike was here in this cottage. Ike was grinning too. "I'm looking at 'em," he said.

She didn't know what they were talking about.

"You two men leave here instantly," she said.

Joe put his pistol in his pocket but he made no move to leave. "You got this room by mistake, is that it?" he questioned.

"I—I don't know. The desk clerk sent me here."

Joe glanced at Ike. "It's like I said. There's a mix-up somewhere. This little piece ain't the one we're looking for. She just got here. See. There's her bags and stuff."

He nodded toward her bags sitting where the bellhop had left them.

"Uh-huh," Ike said. "You got it right, Joe. But—"

They consulted wordlessly with each other. Joe shrugged. "Hell, if we can't find it, we can't find it. That's all there is to it. To hell with it. We looked and that's all we can do."

Ike nodded agreement.

Sally Shaw dared to take a deep breath. The pulse in her throat was slowing down as she recovered from her fright. These two men had been looking for something in Ruth's cottage. They hadn't found it. She had interrupted them but they would soon sneak away like the thieves they were. They wouldn't harm her.

There was comfort in that thought.

"You men go away and I won't report you," she said.

Joe grinned at her. "Sure, baby. We're goin'. Ain't we, Ike? We're goin' right away."

Ike nodded. He didn't seem to hear what his companion had said but he nodded anyhow.

"You don't tell anybody about this?" Joe said.

"I won't tell a soul," he promised.

JOE started toward the door. Outside the dusk was thickening into darkness. A wind was blowing the curtains into the room.

She moved to one side to let Joe pass. Ike didn't move. Joe paused with his hand on the doorknob.

"We might as well get a little bit of this, don't you think, Ike?" he asked.

Ike nodded hastily. "Sure thing. It's already gettin' dark outside so nobody will see us. Sure thing."

She felt the pulse leap again in her throat as Joe took his hand off the doorknob and leaped toward her.

These sneaking thieving little rats, these pimply-faced kids who ought to be in the Army, they weren't leaving. They were—

Joe's hand went around her throat. The scream that was forming died in a shrill gurgle.

"Take your hands off—"

The words were only a rattling gasp inaudible outside the cottage.

She struck at Joe with her fists, raked her fingernails down his face. She knew, now, what they were attempting. The knowledge released wild and furious strength. Clawing and kicking, she fought like a wild thing.

"Grab her legs, Ike," Joe panted.

They had worked together before, had these two. They had picked up girls in their car, girls from the dime-a-dance halls, girls who tended bar in

fierce little saloons, street girls. They thought all girls were like these girls.

She felt Ike grab her legs.

"Throw her on the bed!" Joe gasped.

The words released every ounce of strength in her lithe body. Fighting like a fury, she could hear the two youths grunting and gasping like two dogs as they tried to force her toward the bed.

She felt them lift her from the floor.

She felt the bed creak and crack as the weight of all three of them hit it.

Somehow she managed to tear Joe's hand from her throat.

"Help!"

Would anybody hear her?

Somebody had to hear her! It was her last chance. Ike was trying to tear her clothes off.

She screamed again.

"You little tramp, shut up!" Joe raged. His groping fingers found her throat again.

"Hold her just a second longer," Ike begged.

She could feel her strength going.

"She's givin' in!" Joe panted. "They always give in."

The kind of girls he knew always gave in. He didn't know there was any other kind.

Pound, pound, pound!

A fist pounded on the front door.

The sound froze all motion in the room.

"What's that?" Joe hissed.

"Open up in there!" a man's voice shouted outside. "I heard somebody scream. Open this door before I knock it down."

The two youths were very still.

Again the fist pounded on the door.

"We got to get out of here!" Ike hissed. "Somebody heard us. We got to get away."

She felt them leave her. Struggling to sit up, she screamed again.

The two youths almost tore the back window off the cottage as they escaped.

SHE staggered to the door, unlocked it. A gust of wet wind hit her in the face. A tall man in a wet raincoat stood in the door.

"What's wrong? Was that you—" His eyes took in her torn clothing, the hysterical fear dancing like a mad satyr on her face. "Oh—" he said, comprehendingly.

She sagged into his arms.

"You poor child," he whispered. "Where is he?"

"There were two of them," she sobbed. "They jumped through the window—when you knocked."

"Oh." He led her to a chair. Finding a light switch, he snapped it on. The soft glow of illumination threw the room into relief, revealing Ruth's disordered clothing, the rumpled bed with the coverlet pulled almost off.

She saw him go to the window and look out.

The storm coming down the mountains had reached the lodge, bringing darkness and driving rain with it.

"You say there were two of them?" he questioned.

"Yes!" she answered vehemently. "Boys, they were. Barely out of their teens."

"And they tried to attack you?"

She shuddered.

Anger darkened his face. "The puppies! Somebody ought to teach them a lesson they would remember the rest of their lives."

Then he was concerned with her. "Are you—all right?"

She tried to say she was all right but the words stuck in her throat.

"Here," he said. "I'll take you up to the lodge and we'll report this to the manager. Then we'll find a doctor for you."

"I don't—" She tried to protest. "I don't need a doctor."

She needed something. She could feel her whole body crawling with fear and horror.

"My name is Rapp," he said. "I'm a lawyer."

"I'm Sally Shaw," she whispered.

"Sally?"

"Yes."

"Come on, Sally. We're going up to the lodge. Do you have a slicker?"

She tried to think. Did she have a slicker or didn't she? It seemed so unimportant. "There's one in my bag," she tried to get up and open the bag but he gently forced her back into her chair.

"I'll find it."

He tried to open the new bag and discovered it was locked. She fumbled in her purse for the key. Taking it, he unlocked the bag.

"It's down under my other clothes," she told him.

Finding the slicker, he pulled it over her shoulders and helped her to rise. She felt his strong arm slide around her waist.

The rain was falling in a steady flood as they ran toward the lodge.

She was breathless when they reached the side door to the manager's office but the cold wind and the driving rain had cleared some of the dazed numbness out of her mind. She was beginning to think clearly again and with clear thinking was coming a fuller realization of the terrible experience in the cabin.

THE manager looked up as they came through the side door. He frowned at them. In these lush times, with people clamoring to pay extra rates for the privilege of staying at the lodge there was little point in being courteous to mere guests. Guests grew on trees these

days. To hell with the guests.

"I don't have time to listen to a complaint now," were his first words.

"You've got time to listen to this one," Rapp told him grimly. Without bothering to ask permission, the lawyer helped the girl to the best chair in the office. Mumbling, the manager glowered at them. The glower changed to acute disbelief as the lawyer told him what had happened.

"Attempted rape here at the lodge!" he exclaimed. "Impossible."

The tone of his voice conveyed the impression that attempted rape was impossible. It also conveyed the opinion that even if it had happened, the attempt was far less reprehensible than the fact that it had taken place in such a refined and exclusive atmosphere as the snooty Rocky Mountain Lodge.

"Not here," the manager repeated, shaking his head. "Impossible."

"Nuts!" the instantly angry lawyer exploded. "You've pretended this joint is super-exclusive so long you've begun to believe it yourself. This is just another God-damned hotel where they sock you for the privilege of taking a deep breath. Two young puppies who attempted rape are loose somewhere in this vicinity. I want you to get your house detective on the case right now and I want you to notify the local law in these parts, whether it's a sheriff or the state police, and get them on the trail of those kids. It's time somebody knocked some sense into their heads."

The manager paled. This type of talk impressed him. The tall lawyer angrily shaking a fingers under his nose looked like the kind of man who got things done.

"We don't have a house detective," he said. "We—ah—have no need of one."

"You needed one tonight," Rapp snapped. "Then get the local law."

The manager obviously did not know what to say. He looked at the quivering girl sitting in the chair. "Was—ah—the attempt consummated?" he asked.

Rapp's face turned red with anger. "You tactless numbskull!" he raged. "Get a doctor for this girl. Get him at once."

The manager popped out of his chair. Ringing for an assistant, he sent the clerk scurrying for one of the doctors at the lodge.

"We'll have a doctor here in just a minute," he said. "Now—ah—about the police. I wonder if we really need to call them."

"What do you mean?" Rapp snapped.

"Well," the manager hedged. "We—ah—have the reputation of the hotel to consider. Since the young lady suffered no permanent injury, I was wondering if it would be necessary to call the police—"

He was in agony. The fact that the girl had been attacked was still of minor importance compared to the reputation of his ritzy joint.

Rapp threw up his hands. "I give up," he said coldly. "If you won't call them, I will." He moved toward the telephone.

"Just a minute," the manager pleaded. "Perhaps we can settle this ourselves. He turned quickly to the girl. "Miss—Miss—"

"Shaw," she said. "Sally Shaw."

"Miss Shaw," the manager beamed. "I wonder if you—ah—would be satisfied to be the guest of the lodge for as long as you care to remain with us." He spread his hands in an expansive gesture. "Everything on the house. You can have your choice of the rooms or cabins that are available. All personal service, all food, anything you want to order from the wine list, will be

yours—"

Still shivering in the chair, Sally Shaw shook her head.

"We'll meet your doctor bills," the manager hastily added. "In view of the fact that this alleged assault—"

"It's not an *alleged* assault," Rapp interrupted.

"—that this assault," the manager corrected. He looked again at the girl and shrugged. "Name your price," he said.

"I don't have any price," Sally Shaw answered. "I don't want you to call the police."

"You—" the manager gasped.

"I don't want to talk about it, I don't want to think about it," the pale girl gasped. "I'll pay my own way here. As for the police, I don't want you to call them because—because—I would have to tell—" She was on the verge of hysteria.

RAPP instantly moved to her side.

"There, there," he said, patting her on the shoulder. "I know how you feel. We won't call the police. You won't have to go through an inquisition and have everybody talking about you. That's what you're afraid of, isn't it?"

"Yes," she whispered. "I don't want to think about what happened. All I want is Ruth."

"Ruth?" Rapp questioned.

"My sister. That was her cottage where—"

Ruth could comfort her. Ruth would pat her and pet her and let her cry as much as she wanted to. Ruth would soothe away the memory of those horrible boys. Up until this moment she had forgotten about Ruth.

Suddenly she sat up in her chair.

"Where is Ruth?" she whispered. "She should have come back to the cabin before dark. She didn't. Where is she?"

The two men looked at each other.

"I'll have someone find her immediately," the manager hastily promised.

He started to ring again for his assistant. His hand moved toward the bell button. It stopped in mid air.

The side door was opening again. A man was coming through the door. The man was soaking wet. Water dripped from the brim of his hat, water ran in little streams down his jacket, water squashed in his shoes as he moved.

It wasn't the fact that the man was wet that startled the manager so horribly. It was the burden he carried.

A girl. The *body* of a girl. The sagging, dripping, battered, limp body of a girl was in his arms.

He paused just inside the door.

The girl in the chair was on her feet and running toward him.

"*Ruth!*" she was screaming at the top of her voice. "*Ruth!*"

CHAPTER V

"MY NAME is Zack Gray," the man said. "I'm a private detective." He eased his dripping burden on to the expensive leather couch sitting against one wall of the richly furnished office.

The girl had dropped to her knees beside the couch. "Ruth," she whispered. "Ruth." The single word, endlessly repeated, seemed to be all that she could say.

Zack Gray looked at her. He noted her torn dress, saw that she was already on the verge of hysteria. From the tone of her voice he guessed she must be a friend or a relative of Ruth Shaw.

"Who is she?" he asked the two frozen men.

"She said her name was Sally Shaw," the taller one said.

"Oh," Gray said. "Sister?"

"I suppose so."

Gray was silent. He had never seen

Sally Shaw before and he had not known that Ruth had a sister. He knew without question the shock this sister must be suffering. If he had known there was a sister in the office he would never have brought his burden in here.

"Sorry, Sally," he said. "I didn't know."

He touched her shoulders, felt them shake. "Go on and cry," he said gently. "Maybe it'll make you feel better. If there is a doctor available—" He looked inquiringly at the man he vaguely recognized as the manager.

"I've already sent for one," the manager said hastily. "I—Who are you?"

"What happened?" the taller man added.

"I found her dying in the willows," the detective said. "Two men had trapped her and had tortured her apparently in an effort to extract certain information from her. She tried to escape and one of them knifed her."

"My God!" the manager gasped. He was wringing his hands and he looked as if he was on the verge of apoplexy. "This is horrible!"

"Murder is always horrible," Zack Gray agreed.

"Then it *is* murder?" the tall man questioned.

"Unquestionably," Gray said. "Are you an employee of the lodge?"

"I'm a guest," was the answer. "My name is Rapp. I happened to rescue this young lady"—he indicated the silently weeping Sally Shaw—"from two mongrel curs who were attempting to rape her."

"What?" Gray gasped.

The lawyer nodded grimly. He swiftly explained what had happened. "I judged from the condition of the cabin that these two rats had been searching it when she entered. Finding an attractive and defenseless woman in the cabin, they attempted to indulge

their lawless instincts—”

“They were searching her cabin?” Gray interrupted.

“Apparently,” the lawyer answered.

“And the men who killed *her* were also looking for something,” the detective said.

THE main door of the office opened and a short, roly-poly individual entered. He looked around with a “well, here I am” air. A clerk came in behind him and closed the door.

“Doctor Rawson,” the manager spoke. “I wonder if you would—”

“I’m on a vacation,” the doctor snapped.

“We realize that,” Rapp said. “However an emergency has arisen and if you would be so kind as to give your attention to the matter, we would be most appreciative.”

“Hrumph.” The doctor fumbled for his nose glasses dangling on the end of a black ribbon, found them, set them firmly in place. “An emergency is different. Where is the patient?”

Zack Gray moved aside. If he knew shock, and he had seen a few cases of it, Sally Shaw was on the verge of it. He was only too glad to let the physician take over. He walked over to the leather chair beside the manager’s desk and let himself sag down in it. The fight with the two men, the vicious hammering of the tommy-gun in his ears, was still vivid in his memory. He felt he was lucky to be alive. There was a box of long cigarettes open on the manager’s desk. He took one, lit it, let the smoke seep slowly into his lungs. Rapp moved over and stood beside him.

“What do you know about this?” the lawyer asked.

“I’ve been trailing her for a month,” Zack Gray answered.

“You’ve been trailing her?” Rapp’s voice grew sharp. “May I ask for what

purpose?”

“You can ask but you won’t get told,” Gray answered. “I don’t know.”

“You don’t know?” There was sudden suspicion in the lawyer’s voice. “Isn’t it odd that you would be trailing a person without knowing why you were doing it?”

The detective shrugged. “Not at all. A great part of the work of a private detective consists of locating missing persons. Usually we know why we are trying to find them. They may have fallen heir to an estate. In which case we are trying to find them to advise them of that fact—”

“I know that,” the lawyer snapped. “But didn’t you even ask the person who hired you to find her—I assume you were hired—why he wanted her?”

“Certainly I asked,” Gray retorted. “I got an answer too. Only I don’t think it was the real answer.”

“What was it?”

“I was told she had left the firm’s employ and that certain valuable papers which had been more or less in her keeping had been mislaid. The fellow who hired me—Grimsby was his name, a tall, bald-headed squirrel with an evasive manner—told me they wanted her located because they thought she might know where the missing papers were. I asked him if embezzlement was involved. He denied it. He said they just wanted to find her and if I didn’t want the job they would hire somebody else to do it. I thought he might be lying but what the hell? He was willing to pay all expenses, to pay my regular fee, and to add a thousand-dollar bonus if I could find her.”

Gray shrugged. “Naturally, I took the job.”

“I see,” the lawyer said. “And you still don’t have the faintest idea of why they wanted her?”

“Not the slightest,” Gray answered.

Across the room, the physician, kneeling beside the body on the couch, had completed a swift examination. He looked up.

"Is *this* my patient?" he questioned. "This girl is dead."

"The other girl is your patient," Rapp answered. "She was just recovering from an attempted attack when her dead sister was brought into the room. *She's* your patient."

"Murder!" the astonished physician gasped. "Is not murder enough? Must we have rape too? There, there, young lady." He recovered himself and spoke to Sally Shaw. "Come over here to this couch and lie down. Everything will be all right."

He led the shocked girl across the room to the second couch. "Send someone after my bag," he snapped to the manager. "Send someone after my wife. She used to be a nurse and I need her assistance now. Move! This girl must have rest and a sedative immediately. Clear out one of your rooms—"

"At once, at once," the agitated manager answered. "We have two rooms here on the ground floor that we have fitted up as a small hospital—"

"Then get someone and help me carry her in there," the doctor ordered.

"I'd like to talk to her for just a minute, if it's possible," Zack Gray spoke, rising to his feet.

The doctor glared at him. "Talk to her? Impossible."

GRAY sank back down in his chair. He did not attempt to argue the point. He wanted to talk to Sally Shaw but that could wait, would have to wait. He watched the manager, shocked into action at last, send a staff of bellhops into action. One of them returned with the physician's bag. A second came back with a quiet, sweet-faced woman

who came calmly into the room and showing no sign whatsoever that anything unusual was taking place, went directly to Sally Shaw. "Here, my dear. Let me help you."

He watched this woman lead Sally Shaw out of the room. The doctor followed them.

Gray rose to his feet again. "When anybody wants me," he said, to no one in particular, "you can find me in the bar. But first—" He looked at the manager. "Have you notified the local law of the events that have taken place here tonight?"

"I—I haven't had time. I'll do it right now."

"I would," Gray said grimly. "There are two killers, not to mention a couple of would-be rapists, loose in the neighborhood. Yes, I would get the law in as soon as I could. Those fellows were looking for something. For all we know, they may still be looking for it."

"Yes, yes," the manager agreed. He picked up the telephone. "I'll attend to it immediately. An outside line, please," he said into the mouthpiece.

Zack Gray started out of the room. He thought he would go first to his own quarters and change clothes, then head for the bar. He needed a stiff drink of whiskey and he needed it in a hurry. Maybe he needed two of them.

"What's that?" he heard the manager gasp into the phone. "The outside lines are dead? Nonsense. That's just not possible. The lines can't be down—"

Finally the manager laid the phone back in its cradle. In the bright lights of his office, his face was suddenly gray. "The operator says the outside lines are down," he husked.

"In that case," Zack Gray said from the doorway, "I need *four* drinks."

Closing the door, he walked across the lobby and up the stairs. It was the dinner hour. The dining room was

filled but people were still waiting in the big living room and lobby. Whispers had already started going through the lodge. The scurrying bellboys had been seen. The boys themselves knew something was terribly wrong. They had begun to whisper to the guests.

Startled, speculative eyes watched this big man in the dripping clothes come out of the manager's office and walk slowly up the stairs.

"Who is that man?" a thin-faced woman asked.

"They say he is a detective," her companion answered. "They say he found a murdered girl down by the trout stream."

"What!"

"One of the bell boys just told me."

A third woman joined the other two. "I've just heard that a girl was attacked in one of the cabins!" she gasped. "They say the doctor has her in the hospital now."

Zack Gray knew that startled eyes were watching him as he walked up the stairs. Horror and terror and fear, like grim shadows, were beginning to creep over this swank lodge. He hoped the shadows would remain only shadows, he hoped they would never become realities, but he suspected the dead telephone line to the outside was a portent that the shadows would become blacker before they lightened. *If* they lightened!

IN HIS room, he slowly pulled off his clothes. He was wet to the skin, wet through and through. The package of cigarettes in his pocket was sodden, his matches wouldn't light, the bills folded in his pocket clip were limp as rags, the little key had begun to rust.

The key! He had thrust it into his pocket and had forgotten it. This was the key Ruth Shaw had given him.

Key to what?

Had Broken-jaw and Baby-face been looking for this key?

Had the two young criminals who had searched Ruth's cottage been looking for it too?

If so, why?

Why was this key so important?

He turned it over and over in his fingers. There was no identification mark on it, no number. Then it wasn't a key to a safety deposit box. Keys to safe deposit boxes were usually numbered and the name of the bank was often stamped on them.

There wasn't anything on this key.

What did it unlock? Ruth Shaw knew but Ruth Shaw wasn't answering any questions tonight. Or any other night. He wondered if Ruth's sister knew what it unlocked?

She might.

But he wouldn't be able to talk to her right away. He would have to wait until the doctor was willing to let him see her.

Laying the key on the dresser, he continued undressing. There was a radio in the room, which reminded him of his own portable down there on the gravel bar. Ruined now. Ruined by the rain. Snapping on the hotel radio, he went into the bathroom, drew the tub full of warm water. He was soaking warmth back into his chilled body when he heard the news flash.

"The car Charles Eggstrom used in making his daring prison break today has been located. But Eggstrom himself has not been found.

"The car was found abandoned on a rough mountain trail within forty miles of the penitentiary from which Eggstrom escaped. A posse is scouring the vicinity in search of the killer. A rancher reported seeing a helicopter in that neighborhood today and it is thought possible that Eggstrom, after abandoning his car, made his escape

by a plane brought by confederates to a pre-arranged rendezvous. If this is true, the hunt for the killer may spread over several states."

Zack Gray sat up in the bath. He had seen a helicopter flying across the valley below the hotel. Broken-jaw and Baby-face had seen it too. The ship seemed to have had some terrible meaning to them. They had been so impressed by the appearance of the helicopter that they had momentarily forgotten all about him.

It was their fascination at the sight of the ship that had given him the opportunity to jerk the tommy-gun from Broken-jaw's hands.

Had Eggstrom been in that helicopter? Had they known he was in the plane?

Wind whipped rain over the roof of the lodge. The storm was rising in intensity. The wind was howling down the mountain valley like some gigantic animal in pain.

Above the wind and the rattle of the rain he heard another sound—the throb of a laboring motor.

Out there in the night, out there in the rising storm, was a plane.

Splashing out of the bathtub, he ran to the window. Lights illumined the driveway leading from the road across the golf course to the main entrance of the lodge.

Down on the golf course he caught a glimpse of light reflected back from spinning vanes.

A helicopter! A 'copter trying to land.

As he watched, the vanes slowed. Caught in the driving wind the helicopter spewed sideways. The pilot tried to right it. Zack Gray could see the ship wobbling. The pilot almost caught it once. Then it went out of control and falling the last fifty feet of its descent, crashed on the golf course.

Below him he saw figures running toward the wrecked ship.

He began to dress hastily.

CHAPTER VI

"JUST take it easy, my dear," the doctor urged. In his voice was the note of a soothing lullaby. It was a calming note, a quieting note. "Just take it easy and everything will soon be all right."

She stretched out on the examining table.

"This is Mrs. Rawson," the doctor said. "She will help us."

They were a good team, this physician and his wife, Sally Shaw realized. They knew how to work together. Within a few minutes the doctor had finished his examination and was again telling her that everything was all right. "A little shock is all."

"Good," she said, sitting up on the table. "Then I can go see about Ruth."

"Ruth? Ah—she is your sister—"

"Yes. She—"

The doctor nodded vigorously. "I was thrust so quickly into this situation that I have scarcely had time to realize the relationships involved. Ruth is your sister. But you needn't worry. She will be taken care of."

"But—"

He took two bottles from his bag, busied himself for a moment at the sink. When he turned back to face her he was holding a small glass containing a milky liquid.

"You must rest," he said. "This will help you rest for a couple of hours. After that, you will be able to get up. This is nothing but a mild sedative."

She didn't want to drink the liquid he was holding toward her. In the presence of these two calm people, her wild fear had subsided and her heart had ceased its mad pounding. She was all

right. She tried to tell the doctor she was all right.

"Sure you are," he said. "But rest a couple of hours and you will be better. You have been through a very trying experience. Here—"

She took the drink then. Mrs. Rawson assisted her into the adjoining room, all white and bright, and into the hospital bed, even finding an abbreviated hospital nightgown for her.

The sheets were cool and pleasant. She sank gratefully into them, snuggled her cheek against the pillow. Mrs. Rawson left a single dim light burning in the corner of the room.

"I'll be in the next room," she said. "Call me if you want me."

Sally nodded sleepily. She barely heard the door close. Rain was pounding on the roof above her head. The two rooms of the little hospital were in a single-story projection from the main lodge. Wind rattled the shade on the back door.

She wondered sleepily whether or not the back door was locked. Perhaps she had better call Mrs. Rawson to see about the door. Then she decided it was probably locked and anyhow no one would be outside in all that pouring rain.

She did not know when she went to sleep.

She awakened to the feel of a hand touching her face.

There was a man in the room.

SHE sat up in bed. The sedative was still affecting her and for a moment she could not remember where she was or how she had got here.

"Don't make any noise!"

The man's whisper was harsh, forceful, grating. She stared at him. His hands were near her throat ready to choke off any outcry she might attempt to make.

He was soaking wet. Rain was dripping from his hat, rain ran down his clothes and made puddles on the floor. His cheeks were lean and haggard. Hot brown eyes burned in a granite face that was like a mask.

"I'm not going to hurt you," he said. "Are you Sally Shaw?"

"Y-yes."

Lights glowed in his eyes at her answer. He leaned forward so that his face was directly over her. "What happened to Ruth?" he demanded.

The question startled her. It brought a flood of memories of Ruth and of all the things that had happened. The two hours of sleep and the sedative had dulled those memories. Now, at this question, they came flooding back.

"Why—" She was dazed. "Ruth was—Ruth is dead."

"So I heard. Who killed her?"

"I—I don't know. The detective who found her said something about two men."

"Do you know their names?"

"No. Why—why are you asking me these things?"

"Never mind why. Do you know me?"

She searched his face. Those hot eyes, those lean cheeks, that grim expression, she would know him if she had ever seen him before. But she hadn't seen him. She was certain of that. She shook her head.

"Ruth was my wife," he said.

"What?" she gasped. "Ruth—Why—"

His laugh was bitter. "She didn't mention she was married? That's good. I told her not to. It was better that way, it was better that no one knew but us. But we were married all right. Now tell me something else, something that being her sister you may know."

He leaned over closer. Inside the front of his dripping coat she caught

a glimpse of the handle of a pistol.

"Ruth brought me something. Is that right?"

"Ruth brought you—" She stared at him, wondering what on earth he was talking about. Ruth had been married. This man was her husband. She had brought him something.

"I don't know," she answered.

He grabbed her wrists. "The hell you don't."

"But I don't know," she insisted. "I never saw her. She was—she was—I didn't get to talk to her."

He twisted her wrists. "Don't give me that line of stuff. Ruth brought me something. You know where it is—"

"But I don't!"

She didn't attempt to cry out at the pain. The look on his face warned her not to speak above a whisper, not to make a sound.

"What—was it Ruth brought you?"

"As if you don't know."

THE pain was climbing in her arms.

She bit her lips trying to choke back the scream. "I tell you I never saw Ruth. Somebody—had searched her cottage—"

"What?"

He released her wrists and stared at her.

"Two boys," she said eagerly. "They— But they didn't find it. I don't know what they were looking for—"

"Did one of them have a broken jaw?" he interrupted. Hot anger was in his voice, anger so hot and so searing that she could feel it burn her across the space that separated them.

"No. At least I don't think so. They were just boys."

She saw the anger change to rage. "A couple of young punks out prospecting. But how did they know?"

She could see him turn the question over in his mind. "You saw the punks

who searched her place?"

"Yes."

"And neither had a round baby-face with washout-out blue eyes?"

"No."

She saw despair on his face. He sat down on the edge of the bed. Water drained from his clothes on to the sheets. It made a wet blotch on the edge of the bed.

"Bad luck is dogging me tonight," he whispered.

She saw his eyes come suddenly back to her.

"How do you happen to be here?"

"You mean—in the hospital? The doctor—"

"To hell with the doctor. How come you're here at this joint?"

"Why—" She thought. The question seemed too strange. Why had she come here? "Ruth wrote me—"

"And asked you to come?" His eyes were boring into her. "Is that it? Ruth wrote you and asked you to come here to this lodge?"

She nodded.

"And you don't know what Ruth was bringing me?"

"No. She just wrote and—" Suddenly she remembered.

He read the memory on her face.

His hands leaped to her throat. "What is it?" he demanded.

She could feel the terrible strength in his hands. He wasn't putting the pressure on, not yet. But he had his hands around her throat and he was squeezing hard enough to show her what he would do if she didn't answer.

"I just remembered it," she whispered. "You're choking me! I can't talk."

The pressure relaxed a little. "What did you just remember?"

She gasped for breath. "Ruth— Ruth sent me a metal box—"

Wild light glittered in his eyes. "Go

on."

"She asked me to bring it and meet her here. She sent me two hundred dollars—"

The wild lights grew brighter. "Where is it now?"

"In—" She tried to think. Where was it? So many things had happened that she had forgotten all about the slender metal box.

His voice was as hot as flame from a furnace. "Don't try to stall me, sister, or it'll be the last thing you ever do on this earth. Where is that box?"

"In my bag," she whispered weakly.

"Where's your bag?"

"In Ruth's cabin. I guess it is—"

"You guess?"

"It was there the last time I saw it."

HE JUMPED to his feet. "Somebody was on Ruth's trail and she sent the box to you to bring here. That way whoever was tailing her wouldn't be able to take it away from her. I see it now. She was smart, damned smart."

He was laughing silently. Laughing at Ruth's clever or in relief because he had discovered the box he was seeking. She couldn't tell which.

He started toward the back door.

She thought he was leaving.

He turned quickly and was again standing beside the bed looking down at her.

He had looked dangerous when he first entered the room.

He looked deadly now.

His face was a granite mask.

She tried to draw back across the bed. She tried to draw away from him. He had been frightening at first. Now he was terrifying.

His hands started toward her throat.

She flinched away from him. The look in his eyes told her what he was going to do. The flame in those dark

orbs was burning with cold intensity now. Hot anger and rage were gone from it. Only cold calculation remained.

The smile came automatically to her face. "I'm Ruth's sister," she whispered.

The hands stopped moving toward her. "By God, you are!" he whispered. A shocked look appeared on his face. "You're Ruth's sister," he repeated. "I—I had forgotten it."

His gaze was sombre. "Don't you really know me?" he asked.

"You asked me that before. No. I don't know you."

"You've never even heard of me?"

"No. At least I don't think so."

He shook his head as if he didn't even begin to understand the fact that she didn't know him. "Well, anyhow," he whispered. "You're Ruth's sister. And that's the reason you're alive right now. Do you understand that?"

"I—I think so."

"I oughtn't to do it," he continued, speaking more to himself than to her. "I oughtn't to leave my back trail uncovered. It's bad business any way you look at it."

He was arguing with himself, arguing about the necessity of killing her to cover his back trail. Her only protection was the fact that she was the sister of his wife. And he was trying to argue himself out of that! She held her breath wondering if she would have time to scream before those hands grabbed her.

He groaned. "I ought to knock you off to protect myself."

Rain and wind whooped over the roof.

"But I can't do it," he whispered. "Ruth stuck by me and I've got to stick by her."

One hand came toward her. It didn't reach for her throat. He gently patted her on the shoulder.

"So you're all right, kid. You're all

right."

She dared to breathe again.

"Now I'm going," he said. "You won't ever see me again, *providing*—" His face was a granite mask again. "Providing you will promise me that you won't start yelling for help as soon as I'm out of that door."

He pointed toward the back.

She swallowed. "I promise," she said.

A ghost of a grin tugged at his face. "So long," he said.

The door closed behind him.

She swung her feet off the bed.

The front door opened. Mrs. Rawson's kindly face was framed in it.

"Hello," Mrs. Rawson said. "Are you awake? I thought I heard someone moving around."

She came into the room.

Out of the corner of her eyes Sally Shaw glanced at the back door. It was open a crack.

He was out there! He was listening just outside the door, waiting to see if she would keep her promise.

If by word or gesture she betrayed his presence he would come back into the room.

"How did all this water get on the floor?" Mrs. Rawson spoke. "And look, there's a big wet spot on the edge of the bed."

Sally Shaw was certain he could hear the older woman's questioning words. She lifted her eyes in a mute appeal to Mrs. Rawson to understand and to keep quiet.

CHAPTER VII

FROM his window, Zack Gray could see figures running from the lodge down to the crashed plane. He dressed quickly, jerking on his clothes and snatching a slicker from the closet.

When he reached the wreckage it

was already surrounded by people from the lodge. Flashlights were poking dim beams into the smashed cabin of the ship. A bell boy in the bright blue uniform of the lodge was already inside the cabin. He stuck his head out.

"There's not anybody in here," he called.

"The pilot might have been thrown clear," someone suggested. "If we look around—"

The flashlights spread out. Rain and wind whooped across the golf course. Zack Gray joined in the search. They covered an area of several hundred yards around the plane. Slickered figures were still coming down the slope so that at least fifty people were searching for the pilot and possibly for the passengers of the helicopter.

They found nothing.

The searchers began to gather in groups.

"This is odd."

"What could have happened to the people in the plane?"

None of them could answer that question.

"Possibly the pilot was dazed by the crash and wandered off before anyone got here," someone suggested.

The search started again. It covered a wider area this time. Flashlights could be seen all the way from the lodge down to the willows at the edge of the trout stream.

Zack Gray borrowed a flashlight from a bell boy and entered the cabin of the ship. The controls were twisted around, the cabin itself was knocked lopsided, the safety glass in the windows had been shattered into dust, but it was obvious that a person in the ship could have escaped without serious injury.

He turned the light all over the cabin. Thrust between the seat cushions he found two guns, two .45 caliber automatics. Each was fully loaded.

His own gun was still down in the willows. Slipping the two automatics in his coat pockets, he crawled back out of the cabin. A tall man poked a flashlight in his face. He recognized Rapp at the same time the lawyer recognized him.

"Find him?" Rapp asked.

Gray shook his head. "I think we won't find him."

"Poor devil," the lawyer said sympathetically. "I guess he was knocked half silly in the crash."

"I don't think so. I don't think he was hurt at all."

"What do you mean?"

"Did you ever hear of Charles Eggstrom?" Zack Gray questioned.

"Who?"

"It's been on the radio this afternoon and evening," the detective explained. "Eggstrom escaped from the death cell. I think he was in this ship."

The lawyer stared at him in astonished silence. "If that's true, then we've got another killer loose somewhere here in the vicinity of the lodge."

"We've got one of the devil's original bad men," Gray said. "From what I've heard of him, Eggstrom is as tough as they come. And since he's already got the death sentence hanging over him, another killing or two won't make any difference to him."

Rapp listened in silence. "But are you certain Eggstrom was in this ship?" he questioned.

"I'm certain enough to know that we had better hunt up the manager and have him send a car into town for the local law. There are at least a hundred guests here at the lodge. And they are going to need protection before the night is over."

"I guess you're right about that," the bemused lawyer answered. He followed Zack Gray up the hill to the lodge.

Lodge guests were still scurrying

around in the driving rain looking for the pilot of the smashed helicopter. The wind, increasing in intensity, was driving fine spray across the golf course. Up in the valley above the lodge the detective could dimly hear a vague rumbling sound.

"They're having a cloudburst up there or I miss my guess," he muttered.

Wishing to avoid the questions that were certain to be asked if they went through the lobby, he went around to the side door.

The side door was open.

Rain was blowing into the office.

Zack Gray stepped inside. Several bags were piled beside the big desk in the center of the room. One bag that he vaguely remembered having seen somewhere before was open on the manager's desk.

The manager was lying on the floor beside his desk.

The whole back of his head was caved in.

"IT LOOKS as if you were right about Eggstrom being on that plane!" Zack Gray heard the lawyer gasp.

The detective dropped to his knees beside the still body. He knew there was no point in feeling for the pulse but he felt anyhow. There wasn't any pulse but the body was still warm. Splinters of bone and a little blood showed on the back of the manager's head. Gray looked around for the weapon that had dealt this blow and didn't see it. Across the room the body of Ruth Shaw was missing from the couch. He decided the manager had had it moved.

The luggage sitting beside the desk was wet. Water spots showed on the thick rug.

"The killer probably came in the side door," Rapp said huskily, point-

ing to the water spots.

"Maybe," Gray agreed. "But why was the manager killed?"

"That I can't even begin to guess," the lawyer answered.

Zack Gray rose to his feet. The open bag lying on the desk caught his eyes. He pointed to it. "He was probably examining that bag when the killer came in behind him and knocked his brains out."

"Uh-huh. Whose bag is it?"

"I'll find out." It was a woman's bag. The skirts, the sweater, the stocking, the gay pajamas proved that much. There were no initials on it. It was a good bag, of the type called airplane luggage, but it was not really expensive, not really the type of bag carried by the people who paid the prices at this lodge. Zack Gray tentatively examined the clothes, pulled open the pocket in the side. Needle and thread, a toothbrush, a small tin of tooth powder, a pair of nail scissors, a manicure kit, the white square of a crumpled envelope. . . .

He took the envelope out of the pocket.

"Miss Sally Shaw—" Rapp read over his shoulder. "Then this is *her* bag."

"Uh-huh." There was a letter in the envelope, a single sheet of folded paper. Gray pulled it out.

"Dearest sister," he read aloud. "I do hope you will forgive me for not writing for so long but I've been so terribly busy I simply haven't had time. I've got some grand news for you. I'm traveling! Isn't that wonderful? I'm leaving here very soon and going to a grand place in the mountains, the Rocky Mountain Lodge, where I have reservations.

"I wonder if you could join me there. I am enclosing a money order for two hundred dollars to use in buy-

ing your ticket and any clothes you might need.

"Do try and come, Sally. We'll have a wonderful time. This is a grand place with horseback riding and swimming and everything.

With love.

Ruth.

"P.S. I'm mailing you a small metal box which I wish you would bring with you when you come. It's really nothing valuable but I have been afraid it might be stolen and I thought if I sent it to you it would be safe.

Ruth.

"P.P.S. You will be sure and bring the little box with you, won't you?"

Hastily,

Ruth."

ZACK GRAY turned to face the lawyer's narrowed eyes. "Ruth Shaw?" Rapp whispered.

"She was the one I brought in," Gray said.

"Oh. Hell, so much has happened that I had forgotten her name! What about that box she mentioned in the letter?"

"I don't know what about it," the detective answered. He slipped the letter back into the envelope. A grunt sounded behind him. He turned just in time to see a dripping bell boy loaded with luggage back through the side door.

The boy set the luggage down and turned around. "Where's Mr. Garth—" His eyes went to the body on the floor. "Oh!" he said.

He was a red-headed youngster with apple cheeks and a winning smile. Zack Gray watched the color drain out of his cheeks and the smile fade from his face as he looked at the body on the floor.

"Jiminy Christmas!" the boy gasped.

"I was just in here."

"How long ago?"

"Well, he—Mr. Garth—sent me for the stuff in the cabin of the girl who—who had been killed. I brought one load of it in and was going back for another when that ship crashed—"

"That was thirty minutes ago."

"Was it? I got so busy down at the ship that I guess I forgot about the time. Mr. Garth was just opening that bag on the desk when I left."

"How did he happen to be opening it?"

"Well—" The boy was becoming confused.

Gray saw the confusion. "You don't have to worry about anything, son. We're just trying to find out what happened?"

"Well, I guess he opened it because I told him there was a box in it that looked like it might contain money."

"How did you know the box was in there?"

"I saw it. The bag was open when I went to the cabin. I saw the box as I closed the bag. Since I thought it might contain money, I told the manager about it."

"And he opened the bag?"

"Yes. If there was money in it, he wanted to put it in the hotel safe to protect it."

"I see," Gray said. Taking the clothing out of the bag, he piled it on the desk. "The box isn't here now," he said.

"Stolen?" Rapp whispered.

The detective nodded. "I think so. And now I think we know why the manager was killed."

"So the killer could gain possession of that box!" the lawyer gasped.

Zack Gray nodded slowly. "That's about the way it stacks up." He turned to the bell boy. "Go get the assistant manager for me, will you, son?"

"Sure thing." Stepping warily around the body on the floor, the bell boy left

the office by the lobby door.

He returned with Gurdle, the assistant manager. Gurdle's suit was streaked with rain and the flower in his buttonhole was losing petals one by one. "Holy hell, what happened?" he gasped.

Zack Gray told him what had happened. "I want you to send a car into town and bring at least a couple of deputy sheriffs out here."

"But Mr. Garth already sent a car into town. Or at least he had me do it. I sent the station wagon in."

"Good," Gray said. "I'm damned glad that's taken care of. Now maybe we can take a deep breath around here."

AS HE spoke the back door was thrust open again. A hatless man, muddy and soaking wet from his tangled hair to his sopping feet, stumbled into the room.

It was the station wagon driver.

Gurdle recognized him. "Jenkins! I sent you into town. What are you doing back here?"

"You sent me," the driver answered. "But you didn't give me no boat and so I didn't get there."

"Boat?" the assistant manager gasped. "What are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about a boat," the driver answered doggedly. "You're not getting into town with anything smaller than a steamship, not tonight. The creek is already clear over the bottoms. The water is four feet deep in the low places and still rising."

He rubbed mud and sand from his face. "I hit the water before I saw it," he said slowly. "I swam out and was damned lucky to get out, the way that creek is on the rampage."

He looked at the assistant manager. "The lodge is out a station wagon," he added. "It's gone with the water."

The dripping, fagged-out figure add-

ed a note of gloom to the already tense atmosphere of the richly furnished office.

"Is there any other way into town?" Zack Gray spoke sharply.

"Not unless you're good at swimming," the driver answered.

The same thought popped into the mind of everyone in the room. Zack Gray put it into words.

"Then the lodge is isolated and we're all trapped here until the rain stops," he said.

"I guess that's about it," Gurdle admitted slowly. His eyes went to the body lying on the floor. He looked quickly away. "We're trapped here and—"

"And the joint's jumpin' with murder," the detective ended.

For a second, the lights dimmed in the room. Then they came on again as strong as before.

From outside, above the whoop of the wind and the constant drumming of the rain, came two sounds—the pounding smash of pistol shots.

The thud of the pistol was followed almost instantly by the sound of a woman screaming.

CHAPTER VIII

SALLY SHAW lifted her eyes to Mrs. Rawson in a mute appeal for the older woman to understand and to keep quiet.

He was just outside the door.

He was listening there.

He had a gun and the murderous will to use it if his suspicions were slightly aroused.

"Did you spill water on the bed?" Mrs. Rawson asked.

"Yes," Sally Shaw answered breathlessly. "I wanted a drink but I was so unsteady that I spilled some water on the bed. Did—did I do something ter-

ribly wrong?"

Mrs. Rawson laughed. "No, child," she said. "But if you wanted a drink you should have called me."

"I didn't want to disturb you," Sally protested. She didn't dare even glance toward the door. Was he still out there? Was he waiting with his hand on that pistol she had glimpsed under his coat?

"How are you feeling now?" the doctor's wife asked.

"Much better, thank you."

"That's good. Do you think you could go back to sleep if I left the room?"

If she only would! "I'm sure of it!" Sally Shaw gasped.

Mrs. Rawson's eyes were on her face. What was she seeing there? What was she suspecting? Mrs. Rawson's face, calm and placid, revealed nothing of her thoughts. "You look wide awake to me," the older woman observed.

"I'm really not," Sally protested. "I'm very sleepy. Is it still raining?"

"Cats and dogs," Mrs. Rawson answered. She moved to the door, stopped with her hand on the knob and looked back at Sally. "Are you sure you're all right?"

The girl nodded eagerly. "I'm fine."

She wanted to scream at the top of her lungs, "*Get out of here! Please, please, leave. Don't you know he's out here? Don't you know he'll kill us both?*"

"You look upset," Mrs. Rawson observed.

"I'm not," Sally denied. She tried to laugh. "Just because I spill some water on the bed you think I'm upset."

"It isn't the water," Mrs. Rawson answered. "It's the way you look, as if you thought the devil himself might come popping in here any moment."

She felt her pulse swell in her throat. "I can't help how I look," she answered.

"Goodnight." Sliding under the covers, she turned her face to the pillow.

Mrs. Rawson continued to stand in the door.

Will she *never* leave? He's out there. Oh, God, please make her go away. She's trying to be nice but she's about to get both of us killed.

Rain roared on the roof.

"I think I'll go upstairs and get a book," Mrs. Rawson said. "I'll be back in a few minutes."

"Stay as long as you like," Sally whispered. "*Stay forever!*" she said to herself.

She heard the door close.

Mrs. Rawson was gone!

After what seemed an eternity, she heard the outer door click softly.

He was gone.

LIKE a startled deer, she kicked the covers off. In that moment she was desperately glad that the light in the room was dim. There was less likelihood that he might glance through the window and see her. Across the room in one jump, she jerked open the inner door, then closed it quickly behind her. Even then she remembered to take care not to slam it.

What was she going to do now?

Mrs. Rawson had gone after her book.

Sally's clothes were lying on a chair.

In an instant she had jerked off the nightgown and was frantically pulling on panties and brassiere. Slip and dress, stockings and shoes. She hurried desperately into her clothes, not caring whether they were on right or not. Her hair was tousled and awry. It would have to wait. Snatching her purse from the chair, she opened the door, closed it swiftly behind her.

She was in a long hallway that ran the length of the building. The kitchen and the main dining room were on the

left. The kitchen was silent, closed. The dinner hour was finished. The main dining room had been converted into a ballroom and a bar. An orchestra was playing there. Couples were drifting from the lobby into the ballroom. Two men, their clothes soaking wet, were walking down the hall.

She didn't know where she was going. All she knew was that she had to go somewhere, anywhere, quickly. She walked down the hallway toward the entrance to the ballroom.

Her heels made little clicking sounds on the bright squares of the heavy linoleum. She followed the two men.

"I don't know where that pilot could have gone," she heard one of the men say.

"It's a damned mystery," the second agreed vehemently.

She wondered what they were talking about.

A bell boy was coming down the hall.

"Where's the ladies' room?" she asked.

"To your left, off the lobby," he answered.

She hurried on, aware that the bell-boy had looked knowingly at her mussed hair.

The ladies' room! It would be a place of refuge, a place where he wouldn't come, where no men came.

The sound of the orchestra grew louder as she went down the hall.

"*Onesy, twosey—*" a girl began to sing.

In the big ballroom men and women were quietly drinking and listening to a girl sing about love. It struck her as strange that out in the hallway another girl, herself, was scared to the very verge of death.

What would they think, those well-dressed men and women, if they knew what had almost happened to her? What would they do if they knew *he*

was outside?

She wondered what had happened to the big detective who had found Ruth. Where was he? He had a sort of quiet courage that she liked. She wished he was here, now, to protect her.

He wasn't here. There wasn't anyone. There were people around her but she was absolutely alone. The men and women passing her, they were not with her. She was walking down this big hallway alone. She turned to the right.

There was the ladies' room.

When the door swung shut behind her she felt a vast relief.

THERE were women here. A red-headed girl was applying makeup, a blonde was washing her hands, the colored maid was helping a brunette shorten the straps of her slip. The way the women were dressed reflected the fact that this was a resort lodge. The red-head was wearing slacks, the blonde had on a sport dress.

She went quickly to a washbasin and a mirror, laid her purse on the glass shelf under the mirror, took out her comb and began to brush her hair. The red-head and the blonde were talking.

"Who was the girl?" the red-head asked.

"Nobody seems to know," the blonde answered. "She had just arrived and gone to her cabin."

"Where did the two men come from?"

"They were already in the cabin."

"Oh." The red-head shrugged. "What did she expect to happen to her if she went into a cabin with two strange men? Or with two men she knew, for that matter?" The red-head laughed. "I don't know a lot of men that I would trust to take me to a cabin."

They were talking about her. She glanced up, a hot comment on her lips. Those two men hadn't taken her to

that cabin. She hadn't known they were there. No man could take her to a cabin. Damn them—

Then she realized she didn't want to reveal her identity. She choked off the retort.

The red-head glanced at her and grinned. "Have a big red-hot, out-of-this-world date, honey?" she asked.

Sally Shaw felt her mouth hanging open. The question, she knew, had resulted from her appearance. She must look as if she had been man-handled.

"No," she snapped.

The red-head lifted her nose. "You needn't get hot about it."

"I'm not hot—"

The red-head lit a cigarette and turned back to the blonde. "Who was the girl who was killed?" she asked.

"I heard her name was Shaw," the blonde answered, shuddering. "Isn't it terrible to know that we have a murderer running loose practically in our very midst?"

The red-head shrugged. "I think it adds a certain element of spice to the situation. It livens up the joint."

"I wish I felt that way about it," the blonde answered. "Personally it scares me right down to the lace around my panties. Doesn't it scare you?" she spoke to Sally.

"N-n-no," Sally whispered.

Both girls laughed.

She could have scratched their eyes out. They felt so secure, so sure of themselves, especially the red-head. It livened up the place to have a murderer loose! That's what they thought. They had never seen the grim cold man who had come so silently into her room and had demanded to know the whereabouts of the box she had brought here and who had so casually considered whether or not he ought to kill her to cover his back trail. What would they do if they saw him? Jump screaming under the

bed, she bet! Yell for daddy or yell for husband or yell for boy friend to come to her. There's an awful man here. Come and help me.

What if there wasn't anyone to help them? What if they had to face the situation all alone? What would they do then? What would they do if those two miserable youths suddenly jumped on them, threw them on the bed and tried to tear off their clothes?

What would they do then?

"They say we're having a regular cloudburst outside tonight," the blonde spoke.

"Really?" the red-head answered. "I guess that means no golf tomorrow. And me with a date to play golf with *the* man tomorrow morning! Isn't it irritating?"

"It must be," Sally Shaw said. "It must really be irritating."

Her hair combed, her make-up on, she turned and walked out of the room.

Now what?

The bar, a drink, a sandwich if they could fix one. Then to talk to the manager and report the man outside. The manager would have to know about him so he could call the police to protect red-heads and blondes from something they didn't know a damned thing about.

She wished she could find that big detective. She wished she could have a drink with him, tell him her story, sort of lean on him. He had looked competent, the kind of a man a girl could lean on when she was in trouble.

And she was in trouble. Desperate trouble. She knew it.

As she started toward the bar, she noticed a bellboy come down the front steps and walk across the lobby. He was carrying a metal box under his arm.

A metal box!

Recognition startled her. That was her metal box the boy was carrying. It was the box Ruth had sent to her.

It was the box the desperate killer was looking for.

"Where did you get that box?"

The boy turned, looked at her. "Why—" he began.

"Give it to me!" she screamed. "It's mine!"

CHAPTER IX

THE thud of the pistol was followed almost instantly by the sound of a woman screaming.

Zack Gray jerked open the back door and dived into the rain. Flaring lights on top of poles threw wan circles of illumination over the scene. The cabins were below him, the golf course was off to the right. A gravel path led from the cabins to the lodge.

A woman, screaming with every step she took, was running up the path toward him. Her slicker was flying in the wind as she ran, her rain hat of thin plastic was standing out straight behind her.

"What is it? What happened?" Gray demanded.

"Back there!" she gasped. "One man shot another man. I saw it." She pointed toward the cabins.

"Get into the lodge," the detective told her. "I'll go see what this is all about?"

The woman hurried past him.

She wasn't Ruth's sister. She wasn't Sally. The knowledge relieved a pressure somewhere inside him. When he had heard the pistol shots and the screams of the woman, his first desperate fear was that Sally Shaw had been shot. There was no logic back of the fear, no reasoning. He knew that Sally Shaw was somewhere in the lodge under the care of a doctor and was safe. So she couldn't be doing the screaming. The discovery that it was someone else relieved a little the pressure of the sud-

den fear inside him.

He wondered why he had been afraid it was Ruth's sister. There was no reason for his fear. He had scarcely seen the girl. He hardly knew her. She was just a blurred tear-stained face passing through his distorted mind.

But she wasn't passing through. The faces of other women had passed through. The face of Sally Shaw had remained. This fact worried him. Was he falling in love with a girl he had barely seen?

He thought this was nonsense.

A cluster of faces stared out the door of the office. Rapp, Gurdle, the bell-boy, the driver of the station wagon. The shocked faces of men who had suddenly heard a gun booming in the night. The faces of men who have already seen murder and have not found the sight to their liking.

"Get me a flashlight," he called. "Here. I'll help you into the lodge."

The woman, out of breath and scared almost out of her wits, was grateful for his assistance. "I was just leaving my cabin when I saw it happen," she gasped.

"Did you see the killer?" Zack Gray asked.

"No. That is, I just caught a glimpse of him. The two men were coming from opposite directions. One had on a raincoat and the other didn't have any kind of a coat. They suddenly seemed to recognize each other."

"Then what happened?"

"The man in the raincoat tried to run. The other man—"

"Go on," Gray urged, helping her into the office.

"My heavens, what's that?" she screamed, pointing to the body of the manager on the floor.

"We're turning this joint into a morgue for tonight," Gray answered grimly. "What happened when the

man in the slicker tried to run?"

"The other man shot him," she answered. "He just shot him and kept on shooting."

"Take her to the doctor," Gray said to Gurdle. "If this keeps up, he's going to have more patients tonight than he can handle."

"Yes sir," the assistant manager answered hastily.

"And when you get her taken care of I want you to find eight or ten men you can trust, men that you know of your own positive knowledge are guests of the hotel. Don't get any man that you aren't certain had been registered here for at least a day."

"What—what do you want them for?"

"I'm forming a vigilante committee," the detective said grimly. "The law can't reach us, can't help us. I'm doing what they had to do in this country in the old days before the law came, forming a vigilante committee for the protection of the community."

"I see," Gurdle was startled. He, like everyone else in the lodge, had always lived in a time and place when and where the law could protect them against violence and sudden death. Now they would have to protect themselves. "But why do you want men that are already registered in the hotel?"

"So we can eliminate at least the man who came here in that smashed helicopter," Gray answered. "He isn't registered and you don't know him."

"But we'll know him by the fact that he's been out in the rain and is soaking wet. His clothes—"

"Half the men in this lodge are soaking wet. What's to keep him from walking in here and going to a room and selecting a suit of clothes to fit him? How would we know him from any other guest then? The answer is, we wouldn't. That's why I want you to

pick only men personally known to you to be bona-fide guests of the lodge."

"Oh. And what are you going to do in the meantime?"

"I'm going down to those cabins and see who got killed," the detective answered. "Give me that flashlight."

Pulling on his slicker and hat and taking the flashlight, he went out the door. He asked no one to go with him. And no one volunteered.

THE man was lying face down in the wet grass. One knee was drawn up under him and both hands were spread out in front of his head as if he had died while trying to crawl. Under the beam of the flashlight, the holes in the back of his slicker were plainly visible. Five holes in the raincoat scattered over an area a foot in diameter showed where five bullets had gone into him.

Zack Gray turned off his flashlight and looked around. The rain was a streaking torrent pouring in bucketsful out of a black sky. He could see the cabins clustered in and under the pines and he could hear the rattle of the rain on their asbestos shingle roofs.

The killer might be watching him. He might be hidden behind one of the cabins, behind one of the tall pines.

Zack Gray shrugged. "So, the killer might be watching. So what?"

Flicking on the flashlight, he turned the body over to see who it was.

Broken-jaw's misshapen faced stared up at him.

Broken-jaw! One of the men who had killed Ruth Shaw. One of the men who had trapped her in the willows and had tortured her horribly in an effort to extract information from her.

Broken-jaw was lying here in the rain, dead.

Broken-jaw hadn't fled. He hadn't gotten away. He had remained here in the vicinity of the lodge.

Presumably his partner was here too.

Who had killed Broken-jaw? And why? Who was the man who had come upon him and had triggered him down as he tried to run? Why had those bullets been driven into him?

From the description of the woman who had seen the killing, no questions had been asked, no conversation exchanged between Broken-jaw and the man who had killed him. They had simply met. That had been enough. Broken-jaw had known instantly what to expect. He had tried to run. Two men meet, a gun bangs, curtains. Just like that.

"I'll say this for you anyhow," Zack Gray thought. "You got exactly what was coming to you."

He wondered if Ruth Shaw had also gotten exactly what was coming to her? What strange pattern of human life, what incredible weaving of fate, had brought her to the willows beside the trout stream here in these remote mountains?

Had she deserved her fate just as Broken-jaw had deserved his fate?

Zack Gray didn't know. He thought not. He thought somehow or other she was the victim of circumstances.

And the manager, had he deserved his fate? No! He had been killed in cold blood, struck down by a club in the hands of a man he might not even have known.

Leaving the body lying in the rain, he turned and walked back up the slope toward the lodge. Rain wouldn't hurt Broken-jaw. Nothing would hurt Broken-jaw now, just as nothing would hurt Ruth Shaw, and Garth, the manager of the lodge.

Two dead men. One dead woman. One girl attacked. All within the space of hours. Killers, thieves, hunting high and low, hunting in spite of hell and high water, for a metal box.

He opened the door of the office.

FACES looked at him from inside.

The room was full of men. The body of the manager had been removed. The woman who had seen Broken-jaw killed was gone. There were only men in the room. Gurdle, the assistant manager, Rapp, the lawyer, one of the bellboys, the driver of the station wagon, these he recognized. One or two of the others he vaguely remembered having seen around the lodge but he didn't know them.

The office was quiet. Death-house quiet. The men looked at him in silence. The quietness, the expressions on their faces, revealed that they knew.

Gurdle came quickly toward him.

"I've got these men together," he said. "I've told them what you said, that you're forming a vigilante committee."

"Good," Gray said.

"What—" Gurdle looked his question.

"One more dead man," Gray said.

"One of the two who jumped me in the willows." He told what he had found.

They listened quietly.

"How many killers are loose around here tonight?" one of them asked perplexedly.

"Two for sure," Gray answered. "Eggstrom is one. The fellow I know only as Baby-face is another. Beyond question, these two men are killers. In addition, we have the two youths who attacked the girl in the cabin. They may not be actual killers as yet but they are certainly potential murderers. I don't know whether they're still here. No one has seen them but we've got to consider them as dangerous until we know what has become of them. So we have two for sure, and two possible. Up until a few minutes ago, we had five but one of them has been removed from

our midst."

They were realizing the seriousness of the situation. He could see the realization on their faces. Most of them had wives, some of them had wives and children, here at the lodge. They were thinking about those women and those kids now, thinking hard about them.

Killers are loose tonight. Murder, like the devil, has cast off its chains and is roaming free. Death, violent death, is here among us.

We've got to protect our loved ones. We've got to do something. *We've* got to do the job ourselves. The men that we hire to protect us against killers are far away tonight, shut off from us by a roaring river.

We stand alone.

Tonight we're cave men crouching in the entrance to our cave fighting the great tiger that is trying to enter and devour us and our children. Civilization and the safeguards of civilization are gone. We stand alone, we fight with our fists and with clubs for the safety of our wives and our children. We fight with guns, we fight with the weapons we have. We fight.

Zack Gray went from man to man, shaking hands, asking names.

"I'm Rex Talbert," a tall man told him.

"Glad to meet you, Rex. What kind of what do you do?"

"I'm an architect."

"Good."

"I'm Bill Preston. I'm a lawyer."

"Glad to meet you, Bill."

BACK in the ballroom at the rear of the hotel, he could hear a muted orchestra playing. Out in the lobby a bellboy was calling, "Paging Mr. Grimsby, paging Mr. Grimsby."

Out there the life of the lodge was going on. People were playing bridge in the big lounge where the elk heads

looked down from the fireplace. Men and women, boys and girls, were dancing in the ballroom, drinking in the bar. They had no knowledge that here in the manager's office a vigilante committee was being formed.

"I'm Richard F. Winters. An investment banker," a heavy-set man told him.

"We'll need you tonight, Winters."

Talbert, Preston, Winters: an architect, a lawyer, and a banker. He impressed their names and their faces on his memory. Murphy, a contractor; Evans, a physician; Holmes, a business man. Six men, six different occupations. Rapp, another lawyer. Jenkins, a station wagon driver. Gurdle, an assistant manager. A red-head, apple-cheeked bellboy named Harry.

These were his tools, the tools he had to use to protect this careless, laughing, gay vacation group at the lodge, these dancing men and women, the bridge players in the lounge, the drinkers at the bar, from the menace loose in the night. These were the tools he had to use to protect Sally Shaw. And he wondered why he thought of her again.

"We can lick this situation," Zack Gray said to the group. "We can, I am convinced, protect the guests of the lodge. I'm going to station at least one man at every entrance to the hotel. If there are rifles and shotguns in the lodge—"

He looked at Gurdle. The assistant manager wet his lips and nodded. "We have several sporting rifles and two shotguns."

"Good. We'll get them. And we'll use them to protect ourselves and our loved ones until tomorrow when the law can be called in to take over the job."

They could do the job, these men. They were good tools. He could see it on their faces. They were scared, upset. This was new and different this

vigilante committee. Most of them had read about such things but this was the first time they had ever been on one. This was the first time they had ever needed to be on one. But they were successful men, and now that the need had arisen, they would be a successful vigilante committee.

Looking at them, Zack Gray left confident they would be successful.

"Gurdle, if you will find those shotguns and rifles—"

"Yes sir," the assistant spoke.

Gurdle started toward the door.

Music swelled from the ballroom, the voice of the paging bellboy was muted and distant. Suddenly a new sound intruded in the soft symphony of muffled noise in the big rambling building. Out in the lobby a woman began to scream.

"Give me that box. It's mine, I tell you. Give it to me!"

Gurdle turned startled eyes toward Zack Gray.

"What the hell—" the detective thought, starting for the door.

As he moved the lights in the room flickered, burned dimly for a second, then went completely out.

CHAPTER X

ZACK GRAY waited for the lights to come on. When the room remained dark, he pulled a flashlight out of his pocket. "Have somebody check the main switch, Gurdle," he called out.

"Yes sir," the assistant answered. "Harry. You know where the switches are located. Go and see if a fuse has blown out."

"Right away, Mr. Gurdle," the boy answered.

The detective opened the office door. A sort of subdued silence filled the big lodge building. When the lights had gone out all activity had ceased. The hum of voices had died down, the sound

of footsteps in the halls had stopped, the orchestra had died in a single discord. The big building was still with the sort of hushed stillness that indicated men and women were waiting in the darkness to see what was going to happen.

"Turn on the lights!" somebody shouted from the direction of the lounge as he opened the door.

Matches were beginning to flare here and there. Cigarette butts glowed in the wide hallway that led from the lobby back to the ballroom and bar.

A confused scuffle was still going on in the hallway.

"Who called out here?" he spoke.

His flashlight revealed a bellboy standing in the middle of the hall. A girl, clutching something to her breast, was crouched against the wall.

It was Sally Shaw.

"She grabbed a box away from me," the bellboy said in an injured tone of voice. "I was taking it to the office when she grabbed it."

"It's mine," Sally Shaw said fiercely. She slid along the wall trying to evade the beam of the flashlight. She couldn't see who was holding that light.

"It's Zack Gray," a voice said. "You needn't be afraid."

Gray turned the flashlight beam up on his own face so she could see who he was.

"Oh! It's you!" he heard her gasp. There was relief in her voice, overwhelming relief. She sounded like a little girl who has been lost in the forest, who has been lost for hours and for days and maybe for weeks, and who, hungry and desperately scared, has been looking for a friendly face. Suddenly a friend is there with her, suddenly he has appeared among the trees of the dark forest.

That was the way Sally Shaw sounded to Zack Gray.

RUNNING on tiptoes that seemed to scorn to touch the floor, she came across the hall to him. Then her face was buried somewhere in the lapel of his coat and she was thrusting a box toward him.

"Here! Take this," she was begging. "Take it. It's the box Ruth sent me and asked to bring here."

"You want me to have it?"

"I certainly do!"

"But—"

"I know I barely know you but I don't need to know you. I can feel you're all right." She whispered the words, laughter and sobs all mixed up in her voice.

"Well, thanks," Zack Gray said. Here in this dark hallway, where the only illumination was by matches held by guests and bellboys, he knew that something very, very important was happening to him. He wanted to talk to this girl about the thing that was happening to him, he wanted to talk to her for hours, for weeks, forever, maybe. But the talk would have to wait. His vigilante committee was coming out of the door behind him and the pressure of time and of events was on him. Rapp had found a flashlight, Gurdle had one too. He and Sally Shaw were brightly illumined by the beams.

"Where did you get this box Sally?"

"He had it." She pointed toward the bellboy.

"I was taking it to the office," the boy repeated.

"Where did you find it?" Gray questioned.

"In the attic," the boy answered promptly. "We store the luggage up there, sir."

"How did you happen to go to the attic?"

"One of the guests asked me to go up and get a bag for her. I had to poke

around a lot before I found the bag she wanted. The box was shoved way back behind the other luggage, sir. I happened to see it. It didn't have any name on it and it looked like it might contain valuables so I thought I'd bring it down to the manager."

"The manager had it once," Gray said grimly. "Son, don't you know the manager is dead?"

The boy stared at him. "Dead sir?"

"Yes. He was killed because of this box."

He spoke before he realized that several guests, attracted by the flash-lights, had wandered toward him. He heard little a whispering gasp run around the group.

"The manager's been killed!" he heard a woman whisper.

Well, they would have to know sooner or later. It might as well be now as later.

"Two men have been killed," he told them grimly. "And one woman."

Again the gasp went up.

"Have you notified the police?" a man sharply asked.

He told them about the police.

"Do you mean to say that we are unprotected after three murders have been committed?"

He told them about the vigilante committee. The group was growing all the time as guests came in from the lounge and from the ballroom. Flash-light beams illuminated a circle of tense faces.

Murder and sudden death had come walking into this hotel. There had been hints before, rumors, now they knew the reality. And the reality was a stunning shock.

"I want you all to go to your rooms and stay there," Zack Gray told them. "Lock the doors and go to bed. You'll be safe that way. What is it, Harry?"

The last was addressed to the red-

headed bellboy, who had returned from his errand.

"The switch, sir," he said.

"What about the switch?"

The kid looked scared again.

"Somebody pulled it open, sir. Then he took an axe and chopped out the whole switch block. It'll take a whole new switch, a new set of fuses, and an electrician to install them, to put the switch in operation again, sir."

"Uh!" Zack Gray said. The boy's words were like the whisper of doom in the darkened hotel. "Then somebody is still after this box," he said. "He thinks it is here in the lodge and he thinks he will have a better chance to enter the hotel and hunt for it in the dark. So he's knocked out the lights."

Who was it? It might be somebody looking at him from the surrounding circle. It might be one of those tense white faces. He was barely aware that Sally Shaw was tugging at his arm. "I know who he is," the girl said.

SHE told him about the man who had entered the little hospital. He stared at her in stupified astonishment. "Sally! You went through that?"

"I ran away as fast as he left," she said.

"Can you identify him?"

A shudder passed over her body. "I'll never forget him!" she answered. "I would know him anywhere, any time."

"Do you see him here now?" he whispered.

"Why—" He could see she didn't understand. Her eyes were on him and he could see the lack of comprehension in them. "He's outside," she whispered. "And if he came into the hotel, he would be wet, so anybody would know there was something wrong."

"He may have changed clothes."

"Oh."

"Look around you and tell me if you see him. Whisper it to me."

Her eyes went around the circle of faces. The circle was beginning to dissolve now, to dissolve into agitated individuals. Husbands were looking for wives and wives were looking for husbands. Parents were looking for teenagers. The hall was alive with fear.

"I don't see him," she whispered.

He felt a touch of relief. "Good. That means he isn't here yet. But he'll be here. And he had better not see you."

She still didn't understand.

"Don't you get it, Sally?" Zack Gray whispered fiercely. "You're the only person who can identify him. He knows that. If he finds you, your life isn't worth a plugged nickel. If he finds you in a place where you're not protected, he'll rub you out in an instant, just to keep you from identifying him, from telling us who he is."

"Oh!" At last she understood him, at last she saw the desperate danger hanging over her. She could identify Eggstrom, she could point out the killer! From Eggstrom's viewpoint, this was enough to damn her forever. Anyone in the hotel who stood in Eggstrom's way, any guest who inadvertently opposed him, might be killed. Everyone in the lodge was in danger, but she alone, she of all the people in the hotel, would be instantly eliminated by the killer.

Her danger was increased by the fact that Eggstrom hadn't found the box where she had told him he could find it. She hadn't known the manager had had her bags brought to his office. She had thought she was telling Eggstrom the truth when she said the box was in her bag.

But the killer wouldn't know that. He wouldn't wait to find out. He would think she had lied.

He might be looking for her at this instant, to pay her off for that lie!

"Don't you think we had better open that box and find out what's in it?" Winters, the investment banker spoke. "It seems to be the source of all trouble. Perhaps if we opened it—"

"We'll open it just as soon as we can," Zack Gray answered. "But right now I'm more concerned about two things. The first is getting Sally and the box where they'll be safe. The second is getting you men posted so you can watch the entrances to the lodge."

WHAT to do with Sally? Zack Gray looked at his committee. Rapp's face swan into focus. Of all the people in the hotel, he felt he had known the lawyer the longest. Rapp had always impressed him as a hard, driving individual, the type who got things done and to hell with the obstacles in the way.

"Rapp!" Gray spoke sharply.

The lawyer jumped at his name.

"How would you like the job of guarding this girl and this box until we can get this situation under control?"

"What?" the lawyer gasped.

"It's a dangerous job," Zack Gray continued. "I won't try to pretend to you that it isn't dangerous. But she's got to be protected until we get this panic—" he nodded toward the milling guests— "in hand and until we can start a check to find out whether or not Eggstrom is really in the hotel."

The lawyer seemed undecided. His adam's apple bobbed in his throat as he swallowed. "I can try," he said. "Where—where do you think we should take her?"

"In the manager's office," Gray answered promptly. "Lock both doors. Don't open them for anybody but me. Do you understand that? Don't open them under any circumstances unless I

tell you to? Have you got a gun?"

The lawyer nodded.

"And a flashlight?"

"Yes."

"All right, Sally." He turned to the girl who was still standing very close to him. "Is this all right with you? Do you think you can hold out a little while longer?"

"I think so," she whispered.

Zack Gray personally locked the side door. Before he left the room he gave the girl one of the two pistols he had taken from the smashed helicopter and snapped off the safety. "Sit here on the couch and hold the gun," he told her. "All you have to do is press the butt and squeeze the trigger. Don't be afraid to shoot."

"I'll try," she said. "But can't we have a light or a candle or something?"

"Mr. Rapp will be sitting at the desk," Zack Gray told her. "He'll have a flashlight he can turn on if anything suspicious shows up. Other than that, I think you'll be safer in the dark. No one can see you're in there. And put this box under the cushion you sit on."

He put the metal box under the cushion himself, watched her sit down.

"Good luck," he said.

She had the courage to smile at him.

Rapp laid a pistol and a flashlight on the big desk. The last Zack Gray saw of him the lawyer was sitting in the swivel chair calmly lighting a cigarette. As revealed by the glow of the match, Rapp looked competent to handle any situation that might develop.

Closing the door of the office, the detective heard the spring lock catch on the inside. Now no one could get in without breaking down the door.

Crash went a gun somewhere on the second floor of the lodge.

The thunder of the pistol stopped all sound in the building.

The pistol cracked quickly again and again.

In the horror-filled stillness, a bumping noise became audible. It came from the direction of the front stairs leading up to the second floor.

CHAPTER XI

BUMP, bump, bump . . .

In the desperate stillness of the dark hotel, the bumping sound was loud and horrible. All flashlights had been instantly turned off at the first crack of the pistol. Guests floundering around with lighted matches had hastily extinguished these. Somebody had found three candles and had placed them on a table in the lobby at the entrance to the lounge and at the foot of the broad stairs leading upward. These three candles provided the only illumination.

Bump! The sound came again. There was a sort of finality about it this time. This was the last bump. There would be no more. One final bump and then stillness in which Zack Gray could hear frightened men and women trying to breathe quietly, in which he could feel the rising pulse of fear flowing in waves from the people in the lodge. Tension was piling on tension here in this place.

A man groaned. There was a choking sound. Then silence.

Zack Gray moved toward the front. The gun in his right hand, the flashlight in his left hand, felt sticky.

A man was lying at the foot of the stairs. It was his body falling down the carpeted treads that had caused the bumping sound. He was lying on his back, lying without moving. One foot still rested on the last step.

He was a dark, dead blotch in the thin candlelight.

The detective turned his flashlight beam up the stairs. The beam poked through the darkness. Gray caught a

glimpse of a tall figure standing at the top of the stairs looking down.

The next second a bullet tore the air beside his head and smashed into the floor of the lobby somewhere behind him.

He cut off the flashlight and ducked back beside the staircase.

In the hot stillness a woman screamed, a sound that triggered and released the frantic tensions piling higher and higher in the big building.

The scream of a woman was all that was needed to start a panic. The scream sounded. The panic started.

Zack Gray heard it start. It started with running footsteps in the hall, with scurrying sounds coming from the second floor, with dark figures darting back into the lounge, with men and women running toward the rear of the building.

The shout of "Fire!" in a packed theater would produce a similar panic.

A sweating fat man, darting from the lounge toward the hallway leading to the ballroom at the rear, passed through the thin light from the candles and collided with a woman. Both fell.

"Get the hell out of the way!" he screamed, kicking at the woman.

"You get out of my way, you beast!" she screamed back at him.

At least five women were trying to fight their way into the ladies' room. A half dozen others, already inside, were trying to fight their way out. The result was a cataclysmic series of abusive screams. The women were about to tear the door down but those on the outside were not getting in and those on the inside were not getting out.

Upstairs doors were banging and feet were pounding on the floor.

There was a crush of bodies in the back of the hallway.

"Stop shoving, gentlemen," a man was pleading back there. "If you will

just take your time, everybody will be all right. No need to hurry. No need at all."

The voice sounded desperate. "Lady, please, *please*—"

A girl with nothing but a bathrobe covering her nakedness came racing down the stairs. She had apparently been surprised in the bath. Her robe stood out straight behind her as she ran.

Tripping over the body lying at the foot of the stairs, she fell on her face. Rising to her hands and knees she began to whimper like a frightened puppy.

"Gray!" a voice was calling sharply.

IT WAS Rapp, who had opened the door of the office. "What is going on out here, Gray?" the lawyer repeated. He could not see the man he wanted.

"Get back in there and keep the door locked!" Zack Gray snarled.

He heard the door slam as the lawyer hastily jerked his head back into the office.

Zack Gray, keeping his back against the farther wall, was watching the stairs. *He* might come down the steps. If so, the light from the candles would reveal him.

"Gray!" another voice called in the hallway.

"Here," the detective answered. "Who are you?"

"Winters. What the hell are we going to do?"

"Nothing except try and stay alive until this panic is over," the detective answered promptly.

"But we've got to do something." The financier sounded desperate.

"If you know any way to stop a panic, hop to it," Gray answered. There was a bang from the front door. He looked in that direction just in time to see a mob of people run from the dark lounge and head for the front door.

Each one of them tried to fight his way through first. A kid got a poke in the nose from a man, a woman got her dress torn completely off. She went through the door anyhow, dress or no dress, forgetting in her fright that torrents of rain were pouring from the black sky.

Gray felt sick at the sight. But there was nothing he could do except watch the stairs and wait.

The panic had completely destroyed his plans for the vigilante committee. Most of the men he had selected had caught the terrible infection of the mad fear themselves and were gone or were lost in the crush. He hadn't seen Jenkins or Gurdle or the bellboy.

All he could do was watch the stairs.

The last panic-stricken guest fled through the front door. Wind howled into the building. The three candles on the table flickered and went out. As though this was what he had been waiting for, someone started quickly down the stairs.

Gray thumbed the beam of his flashlight through the bannisters. He saw the lean haggard face, the hot eyes in the granite face that was like a mask, the gun in the man's hand.

Eggstrom! The killer was coming down the stairs. Even if he hadn't seen the gun, the detective would have been certain this was Eggstrom. He could feel the hate and the fury in the man.

Caught crouching in the flashlight beam, Eggstrom jerked up his gun.

The two pistols thundered together!

EGGSTROM'S bullet struck the wooden bannisters somewhere near Gray's face. Flying splinters stung his face, blinding him. The pain was sharp and he thought he had been hit. Dropping his flashlight, he grabbed at his face. He heard Eggstrom dash back up the stairs.

Gray could feel the splinters in his

face. He guessed he hadn't been hit after all but he wasn't certain the splinters hadn't blinded him. He dabbed with a handkerchief at his eyes. Tears were running down his cheeks. Was he blind?

Dropping to his knees, he fumbled in the darkness until he found his flashlight. Was he really blind? Desperately he turned on the flash, wondering if he could see the light. He *could* see it! He wasn't blind! Turning the light off, he crouched beside the stairway listening.

The sounds of panic were dying down in the lodge. Up on the second floor a frightened child was crying, wailing out its fear and terror at the darkness of the night. Probably it had been asleep when the panic started.

Gray crouched, waited. Had he hit Eggstrom? He didn't know. It had been a snap shot through the bannisters but it might have gone home. The silence grew.

"Hey," a voice called from upstairs. "Hey, you."

Was Eggstrom speaking? Was the killer trying to get him to reveal his position? He didn't answer.

"Hey, you," the voice came again. "I want to make a deal."

A deal! Gray was startled but he didn't answer. This might be a trap.

"I'm not trickin' you," the voice denied. "I want to make a deal. I came here lookin' for a little cash box that—I came here lookin' for it. It's all I want, see? It's all I want. If you know where it is and will tell me, I'll take it and clear out."

"There's dead men lying all over the place and you want to make a deal!" Zack Gray said.

Silence while Eggstrom thought of the words he wanted to use. "Sure, I admit I killed a couple," the cautious reply came. "I killed that guy down

there at the foot of the stairs. But he had it comin', he had it comin' plenty."

"Did he?" Gray said.

"I'll say he did!" Eggstrom's voice was hot now, hot with sudden anger aroused by the thought of what had been done to him. "He was workin' with me on the outside, him and Sam. They were my friends, see—my friends. They knew when I was going to make the break and they was supposed to come here and make certain everything was ready. You know what them two punks did?"

The voice rose almost to a scream. "They tried to put the double-cross on me!" Eggstrom shouted. "They tried to grab off the stuff for themselves. And when they couldn't find it, they took my wife—"

"Wife?" Zack Gray gasped.

Eggstrom laughed. "Yes, 'wife,'" he said. "Ruth Shaw was my wife. And they killed her. And I killed them. And I wish they was alive right now so I could do it all over again."

He had enjoyed killing those two men. How he had enjoyed it! The enjoyment showed in the tones of his voice.

"So you give me the box and I'll take off," he continued. "I don't have any time to argue about it. I don't know you, I don't want to have to hurt you. But I want that box and anybody that stands in my way is going to get hurt and get hurt bad."

Impatience was in Eggstrom's voice. Hearing the impatience, Zack Gray knew he would get no answers to the thousand and one questions raised by this killer's statements. Ruth Shaw had been Eggstrom's wife! Then that explained why she had brought the box here but it didn't explain what was in it.

"What's so important about that box?" the detective questioned.

"That's my business," came the quick

answer. "Are you going to let me get it and get out or are you going to try to stop me. I'm not leaving here without it."

"You can't get away—" Gray began.

There was no answer and he realized that Eggstrom was no longer listening.

Was the killer coming down the steps again? The detective could hear nothing but he felt that he held the top cards in this hand. In order to get the box, Eggstrom would have to reveal himself. When that happened—

The child had started crying again, louder now. With the increase in the tempo of those wails, Zack Gray was suddenly clammy with cold sweat.

A light showed on the stairs.

"I'm coming down," Eggstrom called.

The light came from a flash attached to the killer's belt. Gray could see Eggstrom's legs coming down the stairs. He could hear the wails growing louder. He knew he was licked.

Eggstrom, with a child in his arms, was coming down the stairs.

IT WAS a girl child, a four-year old. Her hair was tousled from sleep and her face was streaked with tears. She was wearing little blue woolen pajamas.

She tried to kick herself out of Eggstrom's arms but he held her in an iron clasp. One hand crushed her to his chest. The other hand held a gun.

"Put down your gun," Eggstrom said. "You haven't got a chance."

Zack Gray let the gun drop to the floor.

"Where's the box?" Eggstrom whispered.

"In the office," the detective answered.

"Take me to it."

Zack Gray turned toward the office door. He was licked, licked by a four-year old girl child, licked and he knew it. But what the hell? All Eggstrom

wanted was the box. Give him that and he had said he would go away.

So, give it to him. To hell with the box. It wasn't important. Even its contents were unknown. Let him have it. Sally would be safe. That was the important thing.

Gray knocked on the office door.

"Open up," he called. "It's all over."

Standing right behind him, Eggstrom covered him with a gun. The beam of light from the flash at the killer's belt outlined his body against the door.

"Rapp? Gray speaking. Open up. We're in a spot where we've got to give up."

There was no answer.

In that silence Zack Gray suddenly realized the full significance of three fatal facts, the body of the manager had been found in this office, the box had been found hidden in the attic, and he had heard—without realizing at the time what he was hearing—a bellboy paging a man by the name of Grimsby.

The three facts fitted into a pattern that almost drove him crazy.

He began to pound on the door with both fists.

"*Open up!*" he screamed at the top of his voice.

There was no answer.

From behind the panels of the door, he heard—or thought he heard—the choked voice of Sally Shaw screaming to him to open the door and save her.

CHAPTER XII

SHE jumped at the sound of the pistol shot.

"What's that?"

Rapp snatched the flashlight from the top of the desk and moving swiftly to the door, put his ear against it and listened. He did not answer.

She heard a muffled *bump, bump, bump* that sounded like some heavy

body slowly falling down the stairs.

She rose quickly and went to the door, stood beside Rapp.

"What's going on?" she whispered.

"I don't know," he answered. "I can't make it out."

Nervously lighting a cigarette, she waited. She heard the panic start.

"Well, whatever it is, I guess we can't do anything about it?" she said.

She heard the screams, the pound of feet on the floors.

"Hell's breaking loose out there," the lawyer muttered.

The cigarette was dry and tasteless in her mouth. She went back to the couch and sat down.

"You still sitting on that box?" Rapp asked.

"Yes."

"I wonder—" He hesitated. "Perhaps it would be safer in the desk. We could lock it up."

"Anybody who came in here would look for it in the desk," she pointed out.

Rapp did not answer.

Panic roared through the halls of the lodge but there were no more pistol shots.

"I've got to find out what's going?" Rapp muttered.

She heard him call to Gray, heard the detective answer. Rapp jerked his head back into the room and slammed the door.

"They're too busy out there to pay any attention to what's going on in here," he muttered.

"From the way it sounds, they're too busy even to know if we're alive. Is—is he all right?"

"Who?"

"The detective."

"He sounded all right," Rapp answered. Flashlight in hand, he began to pace the floor. The beam cast bright circles of light on the rug and on the furniture.

"About the box—" Rapp began.

"I'm still sitting on the cushion it's under," she answered.

The roar outside was beginning to die down.

She lit another cigarette and then another. Rapp paced the floor.

Again the pistol cracked.

Again she jumped.

There was silence.

Dimly she could hear Zack Gray talking to someone. He was all right then! Her heart jumped at the thought. More and more this big detective was beginning to fill her mind.

Rapp suddenly stopped pacing the floor. He came toward her.

"Give me that box," he said. His voice was hard and cold and decisive. The tone was that of a man who has thought through a difficult problem and had finally reached a decision.

The only light in the room was from his flashlight. It was pointed directly into her face.

She pushed it away. "The light hurts my eyes."

"Give me that box!" he repeated. "I want to see what's in it."

"But—"

As if he was finally exasperated beyond the bounds of all patience, he dropped the flashlight and lunged toward her.

In the darkness his fingers groped for her throat.

CHAPTER XIII

"WHAT the hell is this, another double-cross?" Eggstrom snarled.

"Yes. But I'm the one who has been double-crossed!" Zack Gray answered. He backed away from the door. Eggstrom followed his movement with wary eyes and the pistol moved to cover him.

The detective knew that the slight-

est suspicion would set the pistol going. Eggstrom was keyed up tight as a drum-head. He would shoot first and ask questions afterwards.

To hell with it! A gun couldn't stop him now. There was more important things in life than life itself. One of them was beyond that locked door.

He backed away ten feet, lunged at the door with his shoulder.

Behind him the pistol roared.

In his mind was the wild wonder: Why didn't he feel pain? Why didn't he feel shock? Eggstrom had shot him but he could not feel the bullet.

In a flashing part of a second the wonder came and went. He saw the hole appear beside the lock.

Eggstrom had guessed his intention. The killer had shot at the lock instead of at him.

Eggstrom wanted in that room too!

Then he hit the door. All the weight of his body, all the driving power in the big muscles of his legs, was behind the lunge.

The lock, with the wood around it weakened by the bullet, snapped out of its setting.

The door crashed open.

Zack Gray kept going.

"Sally—"

The room was inky black. He could see nothing but he could sense sudden movement somewhere near him. He hit a chair in the darkness, stumbled, and fell heavily.

Something struck at him. The barrel of a pistol, a club, he couldn't tell what. The blow grazed the side of his head and landed with numbing force on his shoulder.

At the same instant a light appeared in the doorway.

Zack Gray's assailant was trying to strike again when the light appeared. The blow was arrested in midair. Jerking up the gun with which he was strik-

ing at the detective, he began to shoot at the light.

"Don't shoot!" Gray shouted.

That was Eggstrom's belt flashlight in the door. He was thinking of the child Eggstrom was carrying. Then he saw the killer, probably to secure freedom of action, had dropped the child. His arms were empty.

His right hand wasn't empty. It held a gun.

"Sally! Down on the floor!" the detective screamed.

The gun Rapp was holding exploded again and the light at Eggstrom's belt winked out as a bullet hit it.

Even before this bullet hit him, the killer was shooting back. Aiming at the flash of Rapp's gun, he was firing as fast as he could pull the trigger.

It sounded to Zack Gray, down flat on the floor with his face pressed into the rug, as if a dozen tommy-guns were going at once. The air was torn by the thunder of the guns. The room rocked with the explosions.

"Damn you!" he heard Rapp scream.

Thunder in the darkness! The only light was from the exploding guns.

Suddenly one gun stopped.

Rapp's gun!

The lawyer was out of ammunition. Eggstrom laughed.

"Shot all your bullets, huh?"

His own gun crashed.

THE detective sensed rather than saw Rapp start to fall. He heard the lawyer's body strike the desk. Rapp grunted, grabbed at the desk with both hands, tried to hold himself up. He grunted again. Objects from the top of the desk began to crash on the floor. They stopped crashing. There was a thud.

Wheezing breath sounded near Zack Gray. Gurgling noises came. He was listening to a man die. The gurgles

and the wheezes ceased.

"That was my last bullet too," Eggstrom whispered from the doorway.

A metallic thud, as of a pistol falling from a nerveless hand, sounded.

Eggstrom took two steps into the room. He toppled to the floor and did not move again.

"Sally!" Zack Gray fiercely whispered. "Sally!"

After an interval a thin small voice answered him. "Here. I'm here," the thin small voice said.

"Are you all right?"

"I'm all right," the voice answered.

He struck a match. Rapp's bald head was a white blotch on the rug. The toupee that he had worn had been scraped off as he fell beside the desk. Gray stared at that bald head.

"Grimsby!" he whispered. "The man who hired me to follow Ruth Shaw!"

IT WAS long past midnight before the last panic-stricken guests of the lodge were rounded up from the golf course or the mountain side and assured that all danger was past. Long before this had happened there was a meeting in the office of the ex-manager. Preston, Winters, Jenkins, Murphy, and Gurdle were there. Dr. Rawson and his wife were also there. Zack Gray and Sally Shaw laid the little metal box on the center of the big desk.

One woman and four men had died because of that box. What was in it?

Zack Gray took the little metal key that Ruth Shaw had given him with a dying hand. It fitted easily into the key hole. He turned the lock. The box opened.

Inside was a package of ordinary wrapping paper with two rubber bands around it.

He lifted it out of the box.

A little gasp of disappointment went

up from the watching group. Then they leaned forward again as the detective took off the rubber bands.

A package of bills slid into his hand.

He looked at the top one and gasped.

It was a ten thousand dollar note.

Swiftly he counted the bills. There were an even hundred of them.

"There's a million dollars in cash in this box!" he said.

A gasp of stupefied astonishment ran around the room.

"A hundred ten-thousand-dollar bills!" the detective whispered. The picture was beginning to clear up in his mind now. There were holes in the picture, probably there would always be holes in it, but the main outlines were clear.

"When you run into something like this you've run into one thing," Zack Gray said slowly. "Black market operations. Big black market deals. Maybe international stuff. Maybe not. But one thing is certain and that is that there was at one time in this country a number of huge black market rings."

Winters, the financier nodded. "There was," he said. "For a time there was a big demand for large bills, thousand dollar notes, ten thousand dollar bills. The black market gangs wanted a lot of money in a small package. But they ran into a snag—"

"Yes," Gray said. "They ran into a snag. The government asked the banks to make a record of all deposits or withdraws involving bills of large denominations and to report the names of the parties handling them. That put a crimp in the demand for big bills."

"I'll say it did!" Winters agreed. "And this fellow we knew as Rapp but whom you say was really named Grimsby, he must have got caught with a lot of big bills in his possession."

"Right!" Gray said. "Grimsby was in the black market. How, we don't

know. But he got caught with a lot of big bills in his possession. He found he could not deposit the money in a bank or use it to settle any ordinary transaction without revealing his connections with the black market. Probably there was an income tax evasion charge somewhere in the background too, probably he hadn't declared all this money as income and was facing a stiff stretch in a federal prison if the Internal Revenue Department ever sniffed him out."

"That's about it," Winters agreed. "He had a lot of money, money that he could neither deposit in a bank nor spend. All he could do with it was keep it. But—" The financier frowned. "What happened after that?"

"I know what happened after that," Zack Gray continued. "An employee, a little file clerk by the name of Ruth Shaw, stole the money. This theft put Grimsby in a hell of a spot. He couldn't report the loss to the police, they would want to know where he had gotten the money and how he happened to keep so much dough lying around. If the Federal authorities got wind of it, he would find himself facing a prison sentence for black market operations or income tax evasion, or both. So he had to get the money back, secretly, without anyone knowing he possessed it. He hired me—and probably others as well—to track down Ruth Shaw. I wired him that she was here. He came hopping out here, probably by plane—"

"That's right," Gurdle nodded. "He called us long distance and said he would pay any price for rooms. We gave him one of the cabins. He came by plane. Jenkins, here, met him at the airport—"

"Then," the station wagon driver corrected. "There were three of them. Rapp and a couple of tough-looking young punks—"

"They didn't register here," Gurdle said.

"I only brought Rapp. The punks stayed in town. But they were on the plane with him. They came out here later in a rented car and went to his cabin."

Gray's fist smacked on the desk. "Then that clears up the identity of the two kids who searched Ruth's cabin and—" He had intended to say, "—and attacked Sally," but after one look at her face, he hastily changed his mind. "After I located her for him, he brought a couple of young hoodlums from Chicago to do the actual work of stealing the box for him. He was probably acting as lookout for them while they did the job. Then Sally came to the cabin and the little devils—and he had to rescue her from them because he couldn't take the chance of letting them get caught and revealing *his* connection with them."

"After—" Sally Shaw spoke. "After he came to my cabin, he opened my bag to get a slicker for me."

"Was the box in the bag he opened?" Gray asked.

She nodded. "Yes."

"Then he saw it!" the detective continued. "He saw it, the one thing on earth he wanted most. It was right there in his hands and he couldn't touch it because you would see him take it. When he went back later, it was gone. The manager had sent a bellboy to bring your and Ruth's clothing up here. He traced the box here and found the manager trying to open it. *He* killed the manager."

THE pieces of the puzzle were fitting neatly into place. He had met Grimsby only once and had been impressed by the fact that the man was baldheaded. The wig Grimsby had worn when he came to the lodge had

completely changed his appearance.

"Somebody in his office, not knowing he was using another name, apparently wired him out here as Grimsby. I even heard a bellboy paging him by that name and did not recognize the significance of it."

Mentally he cursed himself for that slip. He had not remembered hearing the name until the locked door confronted him and Rapp refused to answer.

"He killed the manager, took the box but couldn't open it because he didn't have the key. He had to find a hiding place and he had to find one fast. So he took the box to the attic and hid it among the luggage stored there. He was working fast, improvising as he went along. In the meantime his plans were being complicated by one fact that he did not have in his possession; namely, that Ruth Shaw was married to Charles Eggstrom and that she had stolen the money and was bringing it to Eggstrom to be used after he had escaped from the death cell. Eggstrom and Ruth were going to South America, Europe, Asia, where they could get rid of the ten thousand dollar bills at a discount. That's why Eggstrom came here. He was meeting Ruth here, and she was bringing his getaway money!"

The whole picture was clear in Zack Gray's mind at last. Parts of the puzzle had always been tantalizingly clear but the whole situation had exploded in his face so fast that he had never had time to think of the meaning of the various parts. From the time when he first heard the snuffling sound in the willows beside the trout stream until Eggstrom's gun had exploded the last time, there hadn't been a moment when he hadn't been vividly aware of the dark presence of death all around him. Now, for the first time, there was a feeling of peace in the lodge.

Peace. And one of Eve's daughters was smiling at him.

The smile went into his heart and stayed there. It would not go away. Even, sometime toward morning, when he went to bed, the memory of that smile kept coming into his dreams. Lying on the cool sheets and listening to the drum of the rain on the roof, he found himself wishing that Eve's daughter was there in bed beside him.

It was a wish that tingled every nerve in his body.

"That," he thought firmly, "is something that will have to come later, in its own time."

He knew that night would come. All of Eve's daughters, in their own good time, after the ring had been bought and the preacher paid, eventually came to bed.

THE END

HE WAS SUCH A NICE MAN

By JAMES NELSON

A MURDER committed near Slough, England, on January 2, 1845, created a deep sensation at the time, because the killer "was such a nice man." He was John Tawell, a respected Quaker, married, of comfortable means, and a former chemist. But to Scotland Yard the case is interesting for another reason. It marked one of the first times that the new marvel—electric telegraph—was used by the police.

(Almost every scientific discovery has been put to good use by detective science—photography, electro-block printing, X-rays, classification of fingerprints, microscopy, telephony, telegraphy, and wireless, in addition to such ingenious apparatus as the lie detector and those used for the detection of forgeries and tampering with documents.)

These are the details of the crime:

Tawell had been visiting his former servant, a Mrs. Hart, who lived with her children near Slough. One of her neighbors, hearing stifled moans coming from her cottage, went to see what was the matter and met Tawell coming down the garden path, agitated and trembling. Mrs. Hart was found lying on the floor, apparently dying. On the table were drinking glasses and a bottle, but these showed no traces of poison. Nevertheless, an examination of the contents of the stomach showed the presence of prussic acid.

Tawell's behavior became even more suspicious when he left for London. Then this is what happened, as told in the official Scotland Yard report of that time:

The "person who conducts the electric telegraph" was informed, and a "signal was made to the station in London." When Tawell arrived, he was met by a policeman "with a plain coat over his police dress."

This plain clothesman kept Tawell under observation and did not arrest him immediately. But on the next day, hearing no further news from Slough, he took another officer to the house where

Tawell was traced and arrested him. Tawell was brought back to Slough where he acted like he wished to discuss the whole matter fully.

"Mrs. Hart had taken the poison herself," he said. "She was a good servant but a very bad woman." He declared she had poured something from a vial into her glass and then lay down on the rug. He, of course, was agitated and left her.

But it was proved that Tawell had bought some prussic acid "for an external injury." Although he said that Mrs. Hart had poured something from a vial into her glass, no trace of the poison was found in any of the vessels examined, nor was there any trace of poison in two vials found in the cupboard. His story was false.

IN COURT, the prisoner's defense was that though he had offended against the moral laws in early life, he had since atoned for his lapse from virtue by a life of industry and kindness. Although he stressed the fact that he was "such a nice man," he never explained his motive for the crime. There were also long, technical arguments on the poisoning. One suggestion was that the neighbor who had come in and administered water to the dying woman had caused her to choke. Throughout the long debate, there was still doubt in the public mind that Tawell had done it. He had never actually confessed, there was no apparent motive for the crime, and his only defense was that he could not have done it because he was such a moral man.

After several days, the jury issued its verdict. Guilty! He was to be executed at Aylesbury. His respectability, his profession, his religion, and his firm and unshrinkable bearing, both before and after conviction, aroused intense public interest in him. Most people thought he would be granted a reprieve. But just before the hour of his execution he wrote a full confession. He was hanged in his Quaker's dress.

NOTHING BUT TROUBLE

by ROBERT MARTIN

I MET Hot Shot McKennah in the middle of the Square in Cleveland on a bright sunny April afternoon. He was with three other men. When he spotted me, he stopped dead in his tracks.

"Jim!" he bellowed. "My God, Jim Bennett."

I stopped and grinned at him. "Hello, Hot Shot."

The four men stood around me and

I was engulfed in a rich aroma of dollar cigars and Scotch whisky. Hot Shot pumped my hand.

"Where you been keeping yourself?" he asked. "Haven't seen you in two, three years."

"Been out on the coast," I told him. "And other places. I'm working in Cleveland right now."

Hot Shot turned to his companions. "Boys, this is Jim Bennett, an old pal



Considering the number of people who wanted him dead, McKennah could use help. But the bodyguard he hired hated him too!



McKennah, voicing a hoarse cry of alarm, leaped back as those deadly coils slithered out of the drawer

of my childhood days. Jim is the best private dick who ever lugged a forty-five."

The three men smiled politely, and waited for Hot Shot to make the next move.

I had known Hot Shot McKennah for a long time—as he said, from childhood. We had grown up in the same neighborhood, had attended the same public schools. His full name was Charles Rudolph McKennah, but we always called him Hot Shot because as a kid he was constantly experimenting with electrical equipment. I remember that the basement of his parents' house had been a maze of wires, batteries, assorted gadgets and buzzers.

But Hot Shot's early tinkering had paid off. He was now the head of a big electrical appliance company, and the name of C. R. McKennah was a prominent one among Northern Ohio industrialists. He had come up the hard way, from factory laborer to general manager. He was not a tall man, but was broad and chunky, with a thick torso and short thick legs. He had a wide face, a broad nose, shrewd black eyes beneath heavy black brows.

"Jim," he said, "I want you to come out to the house tonight. Having a little dinner. I want you to meet my wife, too."

At my puzzled look, his laugh boomed out over the Square. "I forgot, Jim. You didn't know I was married again. Ethel's a swell girl. You'll like her. We'll look for you around six. Okay?"

I did some rapid mental calculating, and I figured that Ethel must be Hot Shot's third wife. I hadn't heard about the second Mrs. McKennah, or what had happened to her, but I knew that wife number one had died.

I didn't have anything special to do that evening, so I said, sure, I'd be

glad to come.

Hot Shot pounded me on the back. "That's fine, Jim. We'll expect you."

His three companions nodded to me, and the four of them moved on across the Square towards the hotel on the opposite corner. I looked back. A big cigar-shaped Cadillac slid up to the curb in front of the hotel, Hot Shot and his friends climbed in, and the car moved around the Square, headed for Euclid Avenue.

That was at two o'clock in the afternoon.

I WENT back to the office and finished some reports for the Boss in New York. Then I went to my East Side apartment, dug out my tuxedo and tried it on. It didn't look bad, maybe a trifle tight across the shoulders, but presentable. While I dressed I had a bourbon and soda and thought about what Hot Shot's third wife was like. His first wife, I remembered, had been a childhood sweetheart—a shy, pretty girl.

It was about five minutes of six when I parked my coupe in the drive of Hot Shot's sprawling brick house in a suburb east of Cleveland. A maid opened the door for me, took my hat and coat, and I walked into a long room filled with dinner-coated men, bare-backed women, and the smell of liquor and cigarettes. I guessed there were about twenty people there—sitting, standing, talking, drinking, laughing.

A maid stepped up with a tray of cocktails. I downed a Manhattan and grabbed another before the girl moved on. "Can't fly on one wing," I said to her, and she smiled.

Hot Shot saw me then, and he came over. There was a tall young man and a girl with him. The girl was small, yellow-haired, blue-eyed. Her plain black dress was simple, yet daring in a

subtle manner. Her slim bare shoulders gleamed in the soft light. She was holding a cocktail glass in one hand.

Hot Shot said: "Jim, old boy, this is Ethel. Ethel, meet my old pal, Jim Bennett, of New York, Cleveland and points west. Show her your bullet scars, Jim."

She smiled and held out her hand, and as I mumbled the usual things I thought that she was not at all what I had expected. I had expected her to be pretty, like his first wife, but I was unprepared for this girl's fresh, simple appearance. She looked like a nice young college girl.

"Charles has often spoken of you," she said. "Let me get you another drink."

She turned and spoke quietly to one of the girls with the trays. I had to tilt my glass in a hurry in order to get the cherry in the bottom before I reached for the new drink.

The tall young man with Hot Shot's wife stood silently by. He was good-looking in a thin, dark way, and his double-breasted tuxedo fitted him with carefully tailored looseness. He looked bored.

Mrs. McKennah said: "Mr. Bennett, this is Roger Duncan, one of Charles' brightest young men. Aren't you, Roger?"

He gave her a gloomy glance, reached out a limp hand to me. As I shook his hand, Mrs. McKennah smiled at me and moved away.

Roger Duncan stood gloomily by my side and watched the crowd with brooding eyes. By way of conversation, I said: "What do you do for Northern Ohio Electric? In sales?"

He shook his lean, dark head. "Hell, no. Anything but sales. I'm in engineering, or was. I'm now a Second Assistant Vice-President—as of tomorrow. This party is supposed to be in

my honor. Stuffy, isn't it?"

"Maybe you need a drink," I suggested.

He shook his head impatiently. "Booze won't help—not the way I feel. Are you really a private detective?"

"When I work at it," I said. "Look, if you don't like your job, why don't you quit?"

He shot a quick glance. "Maybe I will," he said, and moved away abruptly in the direction of Hot Shot's wife, who was alone for the moment and in the act of lighting a cigarette.

A voice at my elbow said: "Duncan telling you his troubles?"

I TURNED. Hot Shot stood there, a highball glass in his hand, a big cigar between his strong teeth.

"He don't seem very happy," I said. "What's the matter with him?"

Hot Shot laughed shortly. "Nothing's the matter with him—nothing but himself. He's a bright boy—working for me four years now. A bang-up engineer, lots of stuff on the ball. About six months ago he began to act queer—had moody spells. I finally had to move him out of engineering—he couldn't get along with the rest of the boys."

"So you kicked him upstairs?" I asked.

Hot Shot gripped his cigar tighter between his teeth. "Yeah, that's about it. I hate to let him go, and he may snap out of it. I'm thinking about sending him out to the coast."

"Is he married?" I asked.

"No."

Some more people wandered up, and Hot Shot introduced me. All of them, it appeared, were working for Hot Shot in various capacities. They were the usual collection of minor big shots and luncheon club executives, all on their good behavior, all anxious, even the

wives, to please Hot Shot, to agree with him, to laugh at his slightest remark. I didn't blame them, and I thought of my own boss, a tyrant if there ever was one. After all, Hot Shot was the man who cracked the whip, the man who demoted, promoted, hired and fired. I knew that he was controlled by an eastern syndicate which owned a vast empire of appliance factories, but here in Cleveland Hot Shot was the ruler, answerable only to the far-away board of directors.

It is always disagreeable to me to see the small fry toadying up to the boss, however necessary it may be. I thought, too, that it was a price paid for being the boss—not knowing who you could trust or who was after your job. It occurred to me that the royal court intrigues and counter-plots of medieval Europe were nothing compared to a modern business organization.

We went into dinner, finally, and I sat beside Hot Shot's wife. She talked pleasantly and intelligently. Roger Duncan was at the end of the table facing Hot Shot's chair at the head.

Dinner was well along when there was a commotion in the hall. I heard a woman's voice, and then a man's, laughing.

A couple walked into the dining room. The man was big, blonde and tanned. He had a gray tweed topcoat, and was carrying a gray felt hat. His hair was short and curly, and his eyes were blue and bright. He was smiling, and white even teeth flashed beneath a neatly clipped yellow mustache.

The woman with him was small and dark. She wore no hat and her blue-black hair was slicked back tight to her small head and parted straight down the middle. Her cheek bones were high, and her eyes were big and black. Gold circlets dangled from her ears. Her red mouth was sullen. A grade A sable

coat hung open revealing a tight black dress and a heavy gold snake coiled snugly around her white throat.

The big blonde man held her firmly by one elbow. And it was good he did, because she was very drunk.

CHAPTER II

THE man smiled down at Hot Shot. "I hope we're not too late?"

Everyone at the table stared at the couple in open curiosity, but Mrs. McKennah's face was expressionless. Roger Duncan just watched, his dark eyes glittering between half closed lids. Only Hot Shot seemed completely at ease. He got to his feet. "Well, Nick and Dolores," he said. "We had given you up. Glad you could make it. Take off your coats and sit down."

The blonde man removed the sable coat from the girl's shoulders, gently placed one of her hands on the table, and stepped out of the room. Without his support she leaned on the table with one hand and waved the other, palm out, in a slow, sweeping gesture.

"Hi," she said to the table at large.

Her companion came back and took her arm again. She brushed his hand away and stared fixedly at the top button of his vest. "I'm all right, Nick," she said distinctly. "How about getting me one of Charles' dee-licious cocktails?"

Hot Shot said: "Sure, Dolores. Nick, hand her one of those sidecars on the buffet. Isn't that right, Dolores?"

She swung her face in his direction and fixed her dark eyes on his white shirt front. "You ought to know," she said, sullenly.

The man called Nick handed her the drink. She took it in an unsteady hand, and he pulled out a chair for her. She sat down and he took the chair beside her.

Mrs. McKennah said, too sweetly, I thought: "So glad you could come."

Dolores squinted her eyes, twisted the corners of her red mouth upwards for an instant and grimaced in an exaggerated manner. "Thank you, dearie," she said.

And then everyone began to talk at once. I took another bite of sirloin, and under cover of the general conversation I said to Hot Shot's wife: "Who're they?"

Without taking her eyes from her plate, she said: "Charles's ex-wife, and her boy friend, Nick Angelico."

"Cozy, huh?" I said.

She shrugged her bare shoulders slightly. "Charles asked them. He likes to do things like that."

She joined in the small talk, then, and Dolores and Nick were served and the dinner progressed quite merrily. Hot Shot joked with Dolores, and her laugh rang out shrilly, but I noticed that she ate almost nothing. The man called Nick applied himself to his food, and only nodded at Hot Shot's remarks. Roger Duncan just sat, smoked, and watched Hot Shot's wife. The rest of the guests chattered like a bunch of apes, and I found myself talking to a fat woman who had a nephew on the police force in Elyria, Ohio.

At last the dinner was over, and Hot Shot got to his feet. "Come on, folks," he said. "I've got some swell movies to show you."

Everyone exclaimed properly, and we all got up and followed him downstairs to what he called his "rumpus room," a phrase which always, for some reason, sets my teeth on edge.

Hot Shot's rumpus room, like everything else in his house, was done on an elaborate and luxurious scale, from its tiled floor to the chromium and leather chairs. Along the wall was a completely equipped bar which would put to

shame the average cocktail lounge. On the far wall was a built-in motion picture screen, and at the other end was a small projection booth.

I looked inside the booth and saw that Hot Shot hadn't spared the horses here, either. He had one of the fanciest 16 MM sound projectors I had ever seen, all set up with twin thousand-foot reels fore and aft. The walls of the booth were lined with flat tins of film, all labeled and classified.

WHILE Hot Shot went to the bar and personally made everyone drinks to order, I examined his movie equipment more closely. There was a film in the feed reel, already threaded through the projector and attached to the take-up reel in back. I noticed that the outfit carried sound and tone control knobs, as well as attachments for a microphone.

Hot Shot finished his drink mixing, and stepped up behind me. "What do you think of the outfit, Jim?"

"Pretty slick," I said. "Sound, and everything."

"Sure," he said. "I've even got sound on the films I took on my hunting and fishing trips. Not on-the-spot sound, of course. I furnished the developing laboratory the story—names, dates, places, stuff like that—they dubbed in the running commentary on the film, with a musical background."

"Just like the news reels, huh?"

Hot Shot chuckled. "Wait until you see it work."

He leaned out of the booth and yelled at his guests: "Everybody ready for the big show?"

They all shouted enthusiastic assent, and Hot Shot stepped back into the booth. He was grinning like a kid with a new electric train. He switched off the lights in the room, and by the glow from a small pilot bulb in the projector

he flipped a lever marked, "Sound." In a minute I heard a faint hissing sound from behind the screen, and I knew that his speaker was working. Hot Shot looked at me, still grinning, and then he touched a knob which started the projector.

There was a humming sound as the film began to feed through the sprockets, and the screen at the far end of the room was flooded with bright light. And then music began, and a title came onto the screen. It read: "*Deer! A Pictorial Account of a Hunting Trip into Northern Canada Made by Charles R. McKennah and—*" Here followed a list of Hot Shot's hunting companions. Then the commentator's deep voice hit the sound track: "*In the wilderness, two hundred and fifty miles north of Sudbury, Ontario.* . . ."

The picture began. It was in color, and was composed entirely of rather amateurish shots of Hot Shot and his pals in the north woods. All wore bright red shirts, and they moved about self-consciously, grinning and clowning into the camera. When they spotted a deer, it was only a gray speck in the picture, but the sound of the high-powered big game rifles boomed out impressively on the dubbed-in sound track. And then there was a close-up, slightly out of focus, of Hot Shot, himself, standing proudly beside the body of a deer the size of a collie dog. Hot Shot was laughing into the camera and waving an arm. The commentator said: "*Mc-Kennah gets his deer, a magnificent, two-point buck*"

And then the screen went black. And silent. Only the humming sound of the projector could be heard. I looked quickly at Hot Shot. He was peering at the projector, a puzzled look on his face. The machine appeared to be working perfectly, with the film feeding down

past the lenses with precision speed. But I noticed that the film appeared to be blank—no pictures were in the tiny frames.

And then the room was filled with a voice. It was not the hired voice of the professional commentator, although it came from the loud-speaker behind the screen. It sounded little like an imitation of a radio horror story announcer.

The voice said, slowly and distinctly: "Charles McKennah, you are about to die."

CHAPTER III

FOR a couple of seconds the room was silent. And then the voice of Dolores rose in shrill laughter. She didn't stop. She kept on laughing, hysterically, until it seemed that her throat would crack. It was a sound to make your nerves squirm.

I glanced at Hot Shot. He was no longer grinning, and for a second I thought that his face showed terror. But he quickly regained his composure and leaned out of the booth. His voice boomed out above the sound of Dolores' laughter. "Some gag, huh?" he shouted.

And then everyone in the room was laughing like idiots. Dolores quieted down, and the bright colored pictures flashed on the screen again with the suave voice of the narrator telling of the prowess of C. R. McKennah. In a couple of minutes the film was ended, and Hot Shot put a new reel on the spindle. This film concerned his experiences fishing for trout in Michigan, and it went through the projector without incident. After that, he ran off some commercial cartoons and a couple of reels of the previous season's football highlights, and then the show was over.

The guests crowded around the bar, and Mrs. McKennah, assisted by Roger

Duncan, busied themselves making drinks for the crowd. I helped Hot Shot re-wind his film. I saw that his hands were shaking as he transferred reels and shifted the gear on the spindle of the re-wind reel.

I said: "Was that a gag, or wasn't it?"

He shot me a quick up-from-under glance, and his fleshy cheeks seemed to shrivel and whiten. "Jim," he said, "I want to talk to you. Stick around."

"Okay," I said. "Leave that deer hunting film out. I want to look it over before you re-wind it."

He nodded, and we both watched the film as it snicked around the take-up reel.

Dolores came up to the doorway of the booth. She supported herself unsteadily against the sides of the door and leaned inside. Her lids drooped over her large dark eyes, and when she spoke her voice was thick.

"Charles," she said. "Charles—a big, strong man like you, murdering a poor little dinky deer."

"Now, Dolores," said Hot Shot. "You need a drink. Go ask Ethel to give you one."

"To hell with little Ethel," she said. "I want to talk to you. Right now."

"Later," said Hot Shot. He sounded irritable. "Run along."

"Charles," she said, swaying in the doorway, "you better let me talk to you now. You just better, that's all."

Nick Angelico stepped up behind her. He was smiling. He grasped one of her wrists. "Come on, Dolores," he said, still smiling. "Let's go upstairs."

She jerked her wrist free from his grasp. He grabbed it again with a smooth, swift motion, like a snake striking. I saw her lips curl in sudden pain.

"Come on, Dolores," said Angelico, softly. "You and I'll go upstairs."

He flashed a smile at me, winked one

eye, and pulled Dolores towards the stairway. He was almost dragging her.

THE rest of the guests hung around the bar, and after the film was re-wound Hot Shot and I joined them. We had a couple of drinks, and Hot Shot joked with everyone, including his wife and Roger Duncan. He was playing his part perfectly. Tomorrow he might be the stern boss, but tonight he was just one of the boys. His wife was pleasant and friendly, and talked to me at some length about her collection of Indian pottery. She knew a lot about it, and I found myself becoming interested, when abruptly she asked: "Where's Dolores and Nick?"

"Nick took her upstairs," I replied. "Dolores wasn't feeling so good."

"Poor Dolores," she laughed. "I don't know what she would do if Nick didn't look after her."

"What does this Nick do for a living?" I asked her.

"Oh, a number of things. He has some citrus groves in Florida, and he owns some race horses—and a gambling club south of town. The Midway Inn. You've probably heard of it."

"Yes," I said. "A versatile fellow, Angelico. Italian?"

"His father was, I believe."

Hot Shot's guests were beginning to leave. One couple remarked that "tomorrow was a working day," and the rest followed like sheep. Hot Shot and his wife went upstairs with them, and I found myself alone with Roger Duncan. He was swishing the ice around in an over-sized highball glass and staring moodily at the array of bottles behind the bar. I looked at my wrist watch and saw that it was a quarter of eleven. Duncan seemed to be unaware of my presence.

I cleared my throat. "Nice movies," I said.

He said: "Not bad."

I poured myself another drink.

"Are you a friend of McKennah's?"

Duncan asked.

"Kids together. Haven't seen him for a long time."

"I hate his guts," Duncan said distinctly.

Nick Angelico came down the stairs. He paused to light a cigarette, and then he came over to the bar. He smiled at me, and said to Duncan: "How you doing, Roger?"

Duncan was pouring himself another drink. "Go to hell, Nick," he said.

Angelico's blue eyes seemed to glitter for just an instant. Then he smiled at me and winked.

"How's Dolores?" I asked him.

He laughed, showed his white teeth. "I put her to bed. Ethel's got a guest for the night, whether she likes it or not. How did you like the movies?"

"Okay. It's a nice outfit."

Abruptly Duncan slammed his glass to the bar, turned, and walked a little unsteadily towards the stairs. Angelico and I watched him as he went up the steps.

Angelico said: "Bennett, maybe you've guessed it. Duncan is in love with McKennah's wife."

"I wondered," I said. "McKennah beat him out?"

"Something like that. Ethel used to work for McKennah—secretary. She and Duncan were engaged. And then something happened. They had a quarrel, or something. Anyhow, Ethel ups and marries her boss."

"Why does Duncan hang around then?" I asked.

Angelico grinned. "You don't know McKennah very well. He's Duncan's boss, you know. I think he likes to rub it in."

"No offense," I said, "but is that why he asks his ex-wife to dinner too?"

"Maybe," he said. "It don't make any difference to me. Dolores is all right—when she's sober."

"Why don't Duncan get out?" I asked.

He shrugged his wide shoulders. "I don't know. Maybe he thinks he still has a chance."

"Has he?"

"I don't think so. Not with McKennah's dough."

"Is McKennah pretty well heeled?"

He shrugged again. "He's got enough."

"So that's it," I said.

"Money does a lot of things to a lot of people," said Angelico. "Even a nice girl like Ethel."

I sighed. I found myself feeling sorry for Duncan. Long ago, a girl had once jilted me for a fat guy in the clothing business, and I remembered that it hadn't seemed very funny to me at the time.

Hot Shot and his wife came down the stairs. "Jim," he said, "can I see you for a minute?"

I walked over to him. "Sure."

WE WENT up the stairs and I followed him into a book-lined room with a massive desk in the center of it. Hot Shot motioned me to a chair. He closed the door, took a cigar from a box on the desk, and applied flame from a heavy ornate lighter. He sat down behind his desk, puffed on the cigar. I stretched out my legs and lit a cigarette.

"Jim," Hot Shot said, "I'm glad I saw you today. I was just about to go to the police. But I think you can handle it, and there won't be any publicity. I want you to do a job for me, and I want it to be a regular job. Name your fee."

"Tell me the job," I said.

"All right. For the past two months things have been happening, and I can't take it any longer. That cops and rob-

hers crack on the film tonight was no gag. I don't know how it got spliced into that hunting film of mine. Maybe somebody is trying to play jokes, but it's no joke any longer. I've been getting the same routine over the telephone, and in my mail. It's always the same—"you are about to die"—and it's not funny any more. I want it stopped." He paused, and flicked cigar ashes into an ash tray.

"Tell me more," I said. "You mentioned mail. Have you got any of the letters?"

He grunted, and opened a drawer beneath his desk top. And then suddenly his face turned gray and he leaped backwards, upsetting his chair. He stood against the wall, his eyes staring in horror at something in his desk drawer.

CHAPTER IV

I LEAPED to my feet. Hot Shot yelled, "Stay back, Jim!"

The room was very quiet. And then I heard a faint rustling sound from the half opened desk drawer. I moved to the side of the desk and looked down.

At first I didn't see it. And then, in the light from the lamp on the desk, I caught a slight movement among the papers, a quick, brilliant flash of color—red, yellow and black, like lacquered jewels. A tiny head with bright beady eyes reared up over the top of the desk and wavered there. I grabbed a ruler and pushed the slender, brilliant form back into the desk drawer, reached across and slammed the drawer shut.

Hot Shot looked at me. His face was the color of paper. "A snake?" he asked.

"Yeah. Looked like a coral snake to me."

"Poisonous?"

"Deadly," I said. "Where's your telephone directory?"

He motioned to a wall cabinet. I found the thick book and looked up the telephone number of Delbert Zachary, a scientific friend of mine associated with the Cleveland Zoological Gardens. I picked up Hot Shot's desk phone. Zachary answered almost immediately.

"Del," I said. "This is Jim Bennett. I'm over at C. R. McKennah's house, in Mentor. I've got a specimen for your reptile house."

There was a pause, and then Zachary's drawling voice said: "Jim, for a second I thought you said you had a specimen for our reptile house."

"It's no gag," I told him. "We've got a genuine live coral snake right here in McKennah's desk."

"Look, Jim," he said. "You better go home and sober up."

"I'm not kidding, Del. Do you want it alive, or shall I smash it with a paper weight?"

He got excited. "No, no, Jim. I'll be right over. What's the address?"

I told him, and hung up. Hot Shot was still standing against the wall. "Relax," I told him. "It can't get out of the desk."

He walked rather gingerly around the wall and sat down in a leather-covered chair. He took out a large white handkerchief and moped his face. "See what I mean, Jim? It's driving me nuts. A snake—a poisonous one, at that—in my desk. And I hate snakes—always have—don't even like to look at them."

"Maybe the person who put the snake in your desk knows that," I said.

HOT SHOT shook his head. His face still looked pasty. "I wouldn't know. But it's got to stop—I've got enough worries without this. I can't even do my work right any more. Jim, you've got to get to the bottom of this and stop it."

"I'll give it a try. Tell me all about

it, when it started—everything.”

“It began about two months ago. I got a letter. It was typewritten and mailed in Cleveland. All it said was, ‘C. R. McKennah, you are about to die!’ I passed it off as some gag, or the doings of a crack-pot. But they kept coming. I got six letters altogether. Then came the phone calls. A man’s voice, with the same warning. I had a couple of the calls traced, but they came from pay phones down town. And then tonight was that spliced-in sound track on my deer film—and now, this.”

“Got any ideas?” I asked.

He shook his head.

“Any enemies?”

“Any man running a big business has enemies. I’ve got mine, but I know who they are. They wouldn’t pull outlandish stunts like this.”

“How long have you been married to Ethel?” I asked.

“About six months. What’s that got to do with it?”

I shrugged. “I suppose you know that young Duncan is still in love with her?”

He waved a hand impatiently. “Bosh. It was all over between Ethel and Duncan before I stepped in. Kid stuff, anyhow. Ethel laughs about it now.”

“Duncan isn’t laughing about it,” I told him.

“Listen, Jim, you’re on the wrong track. Duncan is all right—he’s just got to grow up. What if he is maybe mooning about Ethel? He’ll get over it. That’s why I asked him to my house—do the natural thing, ignore it.”

“And send him to California?” I asked.

Hot Shot looked annoyed. “Jim, you’re a friend of mine, and I’m asking you to help me—not to pry into my personal affairs.”

“Make up your mind,” I said. “I can’t do one without the other. What

about your former wife, Dolores, and this Angelico? I heard her say a while ago that she wanted to talk to you. Anything there?”

“Dolores always wants to talk to me,” he said. “She wants more alimony. I’m paying her plenty now, and it’s all she’s going to get—at least, until I die.”

“I see,” I said. “Got an insurance policy in her name?”

He nodded. “Twenty-five thousand. She’s the beneficiary. Dolores was all right. We just didn’t get along. We’re still friends—when she’s sober.”

“If that pretty little snake had bitten you, you’d probably be dead by now. And twenty-five grand is a lot of dough.”

“Nonsense,” he snapped. “Dolores is, or was, a professional dancer, and maybe a little temperamental. But she wouldn’t do a think like that.”

“Tell me about Angelico.”

He frowned, and looked at the end of his cigar. “All right, Jim, I’ll tell you—as long as we’re dragging out family skeletons. I know I can trust you. I owe Nick thirty-four thousand dollars, and he’s hounding me for it. I can’t pay him—not right now. Everything I own is tied up. Even this house is in Ethel’s name and I can’t mortgage it without her knowing about it. I’m on a spot.”

“Gambling debt?” I asked.

He nodded. “Yes. I was a damn fool, but you know how it goes.”

“He can’t collect it legally,” I said.

Hot Shot shook his head impatiently. “Of course not. But I signed a note, and he can raise a stink with the Board of Directors in New York. It would ruin me.”

Someone knocked on the door. Hot Shot yelled, “Come in.”

A maid poked her head inside. “Mr. McKennah, there is a Mr. Zachary to see Mr. Bennett.”

"Bring him in here," Hot Shot told her.

IN A minute Delbert Zachary came in to the room. He was a ruddy-skinned, partially bald, middle-sized man with a thin nose and a lot of gold teeth. He peered at me through gold-rimmed spectacles. "Jim," he drawled, "if you've chased me out here in the middle of the night—"

I grinned at him. "Del, this is Mr. McKennah. And stop worrying. We've got a prize specimen for you."

He shook hands with Hot Shot, and then from a coat pocket he extracted a small bag made of heavy canvas. "Where is it?" he asked me.

I pointed to the desk drawer, and Zachary walked over to it. He leaned across the front of the desk and began to slowly slide the drawer open. Hot Shot moved towards the door. I watched Zachary. I heard him mutter something, and then his hand shot downward in a swift motion. When it came up there was a little over a foot of writhing, coiling, brilliantly colored snake between his thumb and forefinger. He held it firmly behind its small jaws.

"*Micrurus Fulvius*," Zachary said. "A fine specimen." He thrust the snake head first into the canvas bag and knotted the draw strings. "Jim," he said. "You weren't fooling. But how in the world—?"

"We don't know," I told him. "Keep quiet about it—for now, will you?"

"Sure," he said. "But these pretty little babies are bad medicine. Not vicious, but they will bite quick if touched or stepped upon. Venom works fast, too—attacks the nerve centers—"

"Get that thing out of here," Hot Shot said.

Delbert Zachary grinned. "Sure, Mr. McKennah. And thanks, Jim. See you later."

He went out, carrying the small bag as nonchalantly as if it contained a pound of chocolate drops.

Hot Shot said: "Come on, Jim. Let's get a drink."

I followed him downstairs to the bar. The lights were on, but it was deserted. I said to Hot Shot: "By the way, let me have that deer hunting film."

He nodded, and went into his projection booth. I went behind the bar and mixed myself a Manhattan. I had just finished stirring it, when Hot Shot came out of the booth.

"Jim, I can't find it. That film is gone."

"Sure?"

He nodded slowly. "Yes. I left it lying right beside the projector. Somebody's taken it."

"That kind of narrows it down," I said. "It was there when the crowd left."

He looked at me blankly. "But, who—?"

Ethel McKennah came down the stairs. She stood on the bottom step and looked at us. Her smoothly painted lips looked black against the dead white of her face.

Hot Shot started for her. "Ethel—what's wrong?"

Her lips moved. "Charles . . . it's Dolores . . . she's dead."

CHAPTER V

FOR a couple of seconds the three of us just stood there. Then I said: "Where is she?"

"Upstairs—in bed," she said.

I went up the stairs to the first floor, found the stairs leading up to the second floor of the house. My feet made no noise on the thickly carpeted steps. The second door on the left side of the upper hall was standing open. I went in.

It was a richly furnished room, frilly

and feminine, with rose-colored draperies and soft carpeting of the same shade. A lighted lamp on a low table beside the bed cast its soft glow over the disarrayed silken blankets—and over the huddled body of Dolores Santos. She lay on her side, her eyes and mouth open, her knees drawn up almost to her chin. I touched her face. The smooth flesh was still warm.

Hot Shot and his wife came into the room. Hot Shot's face was gray. "My, God, Jim, is she—?"

"Yes," I said. "Very."

I asked Ethel McKennah: "Was she like this when you found her?"

She nodded. "Yes. Nick told me that she had had too much to drink, and that he had put her to bed here. He and Roger left together, and I came up here to see if she was comfortable, and I—I found her . . ."

"Did Angelico or Duncan say anything before they left? About Dolores, I mean?"

She shook her head. "Roger didn't say anything. Nick laughed, and remarked that Dolores would have an awful hangover in the morning. That's all."

On the stand beside the bed was an empty cocktail glass. I picked it up and held it beneath my nose. I could distinguish the odor of brandy, lime, and the cloying aroma of cointreau—and something else. A faint, bitter smell. In the bottom of the glass were several specks of a white, powdery substance.

I said: "Well, she had a sidecar cocktail before she died."

"Her favorite drink," said Hot Shot softly. He looked around the room. "Her old room, too—the one she had while we were married."

Ethel McKennah turned her face away. "Poor Dolores," she said.

"Jim, what killed her?" asked Hot

Shot. "Just too much liquor, or what?"

I didn't answer. Beneath the dead girl's body I spotted the protruding corner of a black leather purse. I pulled it gently out. There was a big gold "D.S." on the clasp. I opened it. The purse contained the usual woman's junk—lipstick, powder, matches, cigarettes, coins. Beneath a folded handkerchief I found a small glass vial. It was filled with a white powder. I unscrewed the cap, and as I did so some of the powder spilled into my hand. I smelled it, and then I knew what the substance was in the bottom of Dolores' cocktail glass. White arsenic.

Hot Shot and his wife were watching me silently. I held up the little bottle. "The poor girl killed herself," I said.

Hot Shot looked at me blankly, and then quickly averted his eyes. "Poisoned herself? But why—?"

Ethel McKennah turned and moved towards the door. "How horrible," she said in a choked voice.

"I don't know why," I said to Hot Shot. "People usually kill themselves because they are unhappy. We'll have to call the police. I'll handle it. I don't think there'll be any trouble."

"It'll get in the papers," Hot Shot said.

I shrugged. "You can't help that. It's just one of those things."

ETHEL McKENNAH came back to the bedside. She looked at the still body of the girl for an instant, and then she gently drew a sheet over the dead face. She turned and went silently out of the room.

I said to Hot Shot: "Is there a phone up here?"

"Yes. Out in the hall."

I found the phone in an alcove, and called the police. Hot Shot came out of the dead girl's room and we both went back down to the basement. I finished

the Manhattan I had mixed, and Hot Shot poured himself a stiff slug of brandy. His wife made some coffee. None of us said very much.

The cops came, and the usual questions were asked and answered. We told them all we knew. One of the cops knew me, and he apparently agreed with me on the suicide angle. A meat wagon came, and they took the body of Dolores away. After that, I got my hat and coat.

At the door, I said to Hot Shot: "Maybe you better call Angelico—or her folks."

"To hell with Nick. And she hasn't got any folks, that I know of. If she has, they're all in Mexico."

Ethel said: "I'll call Nick. He'll want to know. He thought a lot of Dolores."

Hot Shot didn't say anything.

"I'll see you tomorrow," I said to him. "All of us will have some talking to do, but don't worry about it."

Hot Shot said, "Thanks, Jim." I could tell that he wanted to say something else, but his wife was standing behind him.

I nodded to the two of them and went out. I got into my coupe and headed back towards town. I knew that Dolores Santos had not killed herself.

AS I approached my apartment house on the East Side I saw that for once there was an empty parking space along the curb, and I decided to leave my car out for the night. I parked the coupe, locked it, and started for the broad front steps of the building.

A man stood on the steps. He was hatless, and wore a tan camel's hair overcoat. It was Roger Duncan. I stopped and looked up at him.

"Hello, Duncan."

"I've been waiting for you," he said. "I want to talk to you."

"What about?"

"About Dolores, and Nick. And other things."

"Dolores is dead," I said.

He didn't speak for a second. His dark eyes in his lean face stared at me. Then he said one word: "How?"

"Suicide," I said. "Arsenic. After you left."

He shook his head slightly. Then he said: "Why?"

"I don't know. Got any ideas?"

"Maybe."

"Yeah?" I asked softly. "Why?"

"Not here," he said. "Let's go up to your place."

I looked at my wrist watch. It was twenty minutes after one o'clock in the morning. I sighed. "All right. Come on."

We started up the steps.

A car went past, slow. I noticed it out of the corner of my eye. And then I caught the faint wink of steel at the car's right front window. I flung myself to the steps and yelled, "Get down!" to Duncan in the same instant.

He turned towards me, startled, and then the gun let loose. The slugs caught him as he stood erect. He lurched sideways, stumbled forward to one knee. I hugged the cement steps. The gun barked four times, and the big plate glass doors of the building splintered and cracked. Then I heard the roar of the car motor as the driver kicked it into second gear. I raised my head. It was a black, cigar-shaped Cadillac sedan, and it was heading west, fast. As near as I could tell there were two men in the front seat, but there could have been more in the back. I wasn't sure.

I got to my knees. Roger Duncan was rolling slowly down the steps towards me. His body was as limp as a burlap bag. I grabbed him beneath the arms and laid him out flat on one of the wide steps. His eyes were open, and he

was breathing heavily. His long black hair was looped across his forehead. He looked up at me, and his mouth opened.

"Take it easy," I said to him.

He knocked my hand away. "Bennett," he choked out. "Bennett—get McKennah. . . ."

His eyes closed, and his face flopped sideways. People were running from all directions, and I saw a police patrol car turning the corner a block up the street.

"Stand back," I said to the first pushing group of curious onlookers. "This man is dead."

CHAPTER VI

BUT I was wrong. Roger Duncan wasn't dead. A police ambulance took him away, and I went down to headquarters with the squad car. I told them all I knew about the shooting, and answered some more questions about the death of Dolores. Sergeant Rockingham was on duty, and I knew him fairly well. He was a tall, heavy man with cynical gray eyes and a bushy red mustache.

"Jim, you're holding out on us," he complained. "This is police business, and if you ain't telling us the whole story we'll find it out, sooner or later. Were the guys in that car shooting at you, or at Duncan?"

"I don't know," I said, truthfully. "I really don't. I wish I did. Maybe they were after both of us, for all I know. And as for the Santos girl, you've got the whole story."

He grunted. "Oh, we found the arsenic in her purse, and all that. And the coroner thinks it's suicide, but we're checking it anyway. Why would she want to kill herself?"

I shrugged. "Maybe she was still in love with McKennah. Maybe she was just drunk and did it for the hell of it.

Maybe she was just tired of living."

We talked a little while longer, and I answered some more questions about the shooting, and then they let me go home. It was after three in the morning when I unlocked the door of my apartment. I was dead tired, and I poured myself some bourbon and drank it while I undressed. I had my pajamas on when the telephone rang. It was the girl on the switchboard downstairs.

"There's a Mr. Angelico to see you," she said. "I wouldn't have called you, but I know you just got home. Shall I send him up, or are you out?"

"Send him up," I said, and I put on a robe. In a minute I heard the elevator stop on my floor, and then there was a knock on my door. I opened it, and Nick Angelico stood there smiling. He apologized for the late hour, and I told him to come in. He sat down, and I made him a drink.

He took it, said, "Thanks. I just heard about the shooting—guy down at the gas station told me, I was on my way out to the club. How bad was Duncan hurt?"

"Pretty bad," I said. "They took him to Erie Hospital."

"Close call for you, too, I heard," he said.

"Yeah. Close enough. But that isn't all."

"No?" He raised his eyebrows.

"Dolores Santos is dead—poisoned herself tonight—after you put her to bed."

His bright blue eyes suddenly clouded, and I saw his fingers tighten on his glass. "What—Dolores, dead? Bennett—you're kidding."

"Nope. She drank a sidecar cocktail loaded with arsenic."

He brushed a hand over his forehead. "But—why?"

"You were a friend of hers. Can you think of any reasons?"

"No—certainly not. I was fond of Dolores, but it was just one of those things—you know. She drank too much, but I never thought she would do anything like that—not Dolores."

"Was she still in love with McKennah?"

"I don't think so. She never mentioned him to me, that is."

I poured some more bourbon into his glass, added another inch to my own. I said: "Do they have coral snakes on those orange groves of yours in Florida?"

The change was too much for him. He looked at me with dazed eyes. "What? Coral snakes? Why, yes, we have them down there." He took a swallow of bourbon, and then looked at me coolly. "Pretty creatures, aren't they?"

He got to his feet, finished his drink in two swallows. "Have to be going, Bennett. That news about Dolores is kind of a shock—a hell of a thing. Come out to my club sometime—be glad to have you."

"Thanks," I said. "Maybe I will. By the way, you better stay close to home tomorrow. The cops will probably want to talk to you."

He nodded, and sighed. "Poor Dolores. She should have stayed married to McKennah." He walked to the door. With his hand on the knob, he turned. "Why did you ask me that question about coral snakes?"

"Just curious," I said. "Snakes are one of my hobbies."

"I see." His blue eyes stared at me steadily. "Good night, Bennett."

He went out and closed the door softly behind him.

CHAPTER VII

IT WAS nine o'clock in the morning when the ringing of the telephone

awakened me. It was Hot Shot McKennah.

"Jim, I'm going to be tied up for a couple of days—Dolores' funeral, and all that. But I want you to work on that stuff we talked about. I'll send a check over to your office—how much?"

"Five hundred will cover it for now," I said. "Did you know that Roger Duncan was shot up last night?"

"Yes," he said. "I saw it in the papers. Is he hurt as bad as they say he is?"

"Yeah. Pretty bad."

"Listen, Jim. Check on it, will you? I know the police are on it, too, but Duncan is a good boy, and he works for me. Who would want to do a thing like that—and why?"

"They might have been gunning for me," I said. "But I ducked."

Hot Shot didn't say anything for a couple of seconds. Then he said, "Well, it's too bad. His folks are dead, but we're trying to locate a married sister in Massachusetts. My Personnel office is working on it. I'll see you in a couple of days. And Jim——"

"Yeah."

"Don't say anything to Ethel—about our deal, I mean. No use in worrying her."

"All right," I said, and hung up.

I shaved, showered, got dressed, made some coffee and fried a couple of eggs. I was on my second cup of coffee when the telephone rang again: It was Erie Hospital. They told me that Roger Duncan was conscious and asking for me. They had gotten my address and full name from the police. Duncan's doctor had left instructions that if I came right away, and didn't stay for more than a few minutes, I could see him. I told them that I would be there in ten minutes.

I strapped on a clip holster, spun the cylinder of my .38, put on my hat and

coat, went down to my coupe and drove across town to the hospital. They had Duncan in a room by himself. A nurse met me at the door, and a doctor poked his head over her shoulder.

The doctor said: "Mr. Bennett?"

I nodded, and he came out into the hall. "Dr. Kissler," he said. He was young, with a smooth round face and black curly hair.

We shook hands.

"How is he?" I asked.

He shook his head. "Fair. One of the bullets nicked his lung, and another pierced his abdomen, but he's got a good chance. When he regained consciousness he was in a semi-delirious state and he kept asking for you. Are you a friend of his?"

"Yeah. Sort of."

"We thought perhaps if he saw you it would quiet him. That's the main thing—keep him quiet, and to fight infection. We're loading him with penicillin every three hours. It seems to be working. His temperature has dropped a little. Mr. McKennah, his employer, called a little while ago and said he was to have every care. We moved Duncan from the wards, and put on a special nurse. Do you work for Northern Ohio Electric too?"

"No," I said. "Can I see him now?"

"For a minute. Try not to excite him."

I FOLLOWED him into the room. The nurse stepped aside, and I moved to Roger Duncan's bedside.

His face looked thinner and darker than ever against the white pillow, and his eyes were closed. I leaned over the bed, said: "Duncan, this is Bennett."

He opened his eyes then, and it seemed that there were hot coals burning behind them. His lips twisted in a swift smile.

"Good," he said, faintly. His lips

moved again, but no sound came out. I leaned closer, and I felt his hot breath on my cheek. His words came in a halting whisper: "Get McKennah . . . jealous . . . tried to kill me . . . because of Ethel . . . she loves me . . . and . . . McKennah knows it . . . see? Take care of Ethel . . . he'll . . . he'll kill her next. You hear, Bennett? He'll . . . kill . . . her. . . ."

Suddenly he raised his head from the pillow, and his eyes were wild. He opened his mouth wide, and flopped his arms on the bed in an effort to raise himself up. The doctor stepped forward quickly and pressed Duncan's shoulders back against the bed.

"Morphine," he snapped at the nurse.

I stepped away from the bed as she handed a hypo needle to the doctor. He said, without looking up: "I'm afraid you'd better go now, Mr. Bennett."

I nodded, and went out into the hall. As I walked away I could hear Duncan's rasping voice raised in a kind of a dreadful whispering shout. "Ethel! Ethel!"

As I drove back down town, I decided that I needed some help. There were too many places I wanted to be at the same time. I stopped at a drug store in East Cleveland and called Alec Hammond. I didn't get an answer at first, but I kept on ringing. After a while Alec's sleepy voice said: "All right." He always answered the phone that way.

"Alec," I said, "it's eleven o'clock in the morning. You sober yet?"

"Yeah, Jim. I guess so—now. What's up?"

"Does the famous private investigator have anything important to do today?" I asked.

"Are you kidding?" he said. "I've got a couple of bills to collect for Blum, the Credit Jeweler, Buy Now, Pay Later. And Mrs. Syminowsky has retained

me to catch the fiend who poisoned her cat."

"Okay," I said. "Go out to Mentor and camp in front of 1645 Monument Drive. Residence of C. R. McKennah. I want to know who goes out. I'll see you about noon, or a little after. Got it?"

"Can I eat breakfast first, Jim?"

"All you need is a couple of aspirins. I want you out there in twenty minutes."

"All right, Jim," Alec sighed. "I'll be there."

I WENT back out to my coupe and drove on down town to the office. When I went in, Sandy Hollis was busily typing reports. She looked at me, tossed her bronze-colored hair away from her forehead, swung around in her chair and crossed her long, good-looking legs.

"Good *afternoon*, Mr. Bennett," she said. She folded her arms, and tapped the toe of one high-heeled shoe.

"I had a bad night," I said.

"I'll bet," she mocked. "Blonde, or brunette?"

I sat down at my desk and began to look over the mail. "If there's anything I detest," I said, "it's a nagging secretary. Anything exciting happen this morning?"

Sandy Hollis had worked for me for almost two years, and she was the best secretary I ever had. Her young husband had been killed on the beach at Tarawa. She never spoke of him, but sometimes, in the late afternoon when her work was done, I would catch her staring out the windows past the Terminal Tower with a soft expression in her gray eyes. As far as I was concerned, her job in the Cleveland branch of The American Detective Agency was hers forever.

"Well," she said, "the Boss called

from New York. He wanted to know where the reports were on the Blythe case in Foxtown—and why in hell you were not in the office."

"Then what?"

She looked at a pad on her desk. "You're to call a Mr. Zachary. I've got his number here. And a Mrs. McKennah called. She wants you to phone her as soon as you come in."

"Okay," I said, and I reached for the phone on my desk. In the same instant my office door opened.

I paused, my hand in mid-air.

CHAPTER VIII

HE CAME in quickly, closed the door quietly behind him, and stood facing me. He was a short man, with chunky shoulders and short squat legs. He had a fat, dark face with closely shaven blue-black jowls, bright black eyes set wide apart and a big fleshy nose. He was wearing a green overcoat and a green felt hat with a small red feather in the band. His bright eyes flicked quickly from me to Sandy and back to me again, and he ran the tip of his tongue across his upper lip.

"Jim Bennet?" he asked in a husky voice.

I nodded, watching him.

He said: "I've got something for you," and his right hand jerked up and reached inside his coat.

For a second I didn't get it. When I did, he had the gun half out of its shoulder holster beneath his coat. I was leaning forward on my desk, my coat hanging open. For the umpteenth time I was glad I used a clip instead of a shoulder holster, and I had my .38 out and shooting before he cleared his gun.

He stumbled forward, his head already hanging down, his gun pointing at the floor. He shot twice, I suppose from reflex action, straight into my ele-

gant tan carpeting. Before he went down something hit the door behind him with a crash which splintered the panels, and a heavy bronze paper weight, moulded into the form of the Fountain Boy of Brussels, fell to the floor with a thud. But Red Feather was already on the floor in front of my desk, his legs moving slowly.

I shot a sideways glance at Sandy Hollis. She was on her feet, and she had a thick dictionary poised in her back-flung hand.

"Cease firing," I said to her.

She collapsed limply in her chair, the dictionary in her lap.

"Nice going, Sandy," I said.

I replaced my .38 in its clip and walked around my desk. The man in the green coat lay sprawled on his face, the coat fanned out around him. He lay quite still. His hat with the red feather had rolled off, revealing a bald spot the size of a highball coaster on the back of his head. I reached down and rolled him over. Two of my slugs had caught him smack in the chest. There wasn't much blood, yet. I tossed the green hat with its gay red feather over the upturned face with its expressionless eyes.

"Who . . . who is it?" asked Sandy.

"Damned if I know," I said.

There was a commotion outside my office door, and the sound of voices in the hall. And then the door opened, and people peered in. I pushed everybody out, locked the door, and told Sandy Hollis to call Detective Sergeant Rockingham.

He arrived in about ten minutes. I pointed to the dead man on the floor. "Punk tried to kill me," I said. "I beat him to it. Self defense. Mrs. Hollis, there, is a witness. Who is it?"

Rockingham gazed at the man on the floor, shook his head slowly from side to side, and chewed on his red mus-

tache. "Jim," he said, "It was a damned unlucky day for me when you came to town. All this shooting and bloodshed. What's the town coming to?"

"Stop," I said. "You're breaking my heart. What's this guy's record?"

Rockingham gave me a sidelong look. "About everything in the book. Name of Duke Mossburg, for one. Last we heard, he was in Youngstown. Thought we was rid of him around here."

"Well, you're rid of him now," I said. "Get him out of here before he messes up my rug."

Rockingham shook his head sadly. "Such callousness. Don't you hard-boiled private dicks have any human feelings at all?" Still shaking his head, he picked up my telephone.

THE homicide crew came, went through their mumbo-jumbo, and hauled Mossburg's body away. Afterwards, I got a bottle of Portuguese brandy from my desk and Sandy and Rockingham and I had a drink.

"Rock," I asked. "Anything on that shooting last night?"

"Yeah," he said. "This might interest you. We found a witness who caught the license number of the car. It belonged to your pal, C. R. McKennah."

Rockingham's shrewd eyes were watching me over the rim of his glass.

I said: "Go on."

"Well, we checked. McKennah was not at his office, and he wasn't at home. Nobody seems to know just where he is. The car was in his garage. Nobody else had it out last night."

I said: "Hummm."

"Jim, stop acting so dumb. Why was Mossburg gunning for you? You know, I *could* book you on a manslaughter charge."

"Nuts," I said. "Where would that get you? Anyhow, I don't know why

he was gunning for me. Maybe my past is creeping up on me."

"Could be," Rockingham said. "From what I hear. I just thought it might tie in with what happened last night." He finished his drink and walked to the door. "Thanks for the brandy, Jim. If I think of anything, I'll be on your tail—plenty."

"I'll be around," I told him.

"You hope," said Rockingham. "Next time you might not be so fast on the draw."

He went out.

Sandy said: "Call Mr. Zachary—and Mrs. McKennah."

I got Delbert Zachary on the phone first. "Jim, there's something queer about that snake," he said. "It's fangs have been extracted. It's harmless, but it probably won't live very long."

"Too bad," I said. "I think maybe by tomorrow I can give the story. In what sections of the country are coral snakes found?"

"All the way from South Carolina and Mississippi to Florida and the Gulf States. From certain indications, I would guess that this specimen came from Florida."

"Thanks, Del," I said. "See you later."

I called Ethel McKennah. Her voice sounded tired. "Mr. Bennett, I'm so glad you called. I wonder if I could see you for a few minutes? It's about Charles. I'm awfully worried about him."

"Why, yes," I said. "When do you want to see me? Now?"

"Yes. Anytime. I'll be home all day. How about having lunch with me?"

I glanced at my wrist watch. A quarter of twelve. "Fine," I said. "I'll be there in twenty minutes."

"Thank you," she said. "It's very kind of you."

I hung up, picked up my hat and coat, turned to Sandy Hollis. "Sandy, call the chief of police at Sarasota, Florida and get as complete a report as possible on Nicholas Angelico."

She scribbled on a pad, said: "Yessir. Anything else, sir?"

"Yeah. You better lock the door. I'm not kidding."

She looked up at me and smiled. "Okay, boss. If you say so. Aren't you going to sign these reports before I mail them?"

"Sign 'em for me," I told her. "I'll be at Mrs. McKennah's for the next hour or so."

She winked at me and made a quick clucking sound with her tongue.

"Strictly business, Mrs. Hollis," I said severely, and went out.

WHEN I turned into the McKennah drive fifteen minutes later I spotted the lanky form of Alec Hammond across the street. He was leaning on the running board of a laundry truck and in earnest conversation with the driver. He didn't look up as I swung up the drive and parked by the side terrace. I went up to the front door and rang the bell.

A maid answered immediately. She was a young fat girl and she looked scared. Her plump cheeks were pale, and there was a wisp of black hair hanging over her short nose.

"Mr. Bennett?" she asked breathlessly, and before I could nod my head she continued. "Come right in. Mrs. McKennah is in the living room."

She crossed the hall with short, quick steps and opened a door for me. "She's sick, sir," she whispered, and fled down the hall.

I stepped into the long room which had been filled with Hot Shot's dinner guests the night before. Ethel McKennah was lying on a cream-colored divan.

She was wearing dark green gabardine slacks, green sandals, and a pale yellow sweater. Her yellow hair shone brightly in a bar of sunlight streaming through the French windows. There wasn't a shred of color in her face, and her lips were pale. She smiled faintly when I entered, and indicated a chair with a limp hand.

I sat down, held my hat in my hand. "I'm sorry," I said. "I didn't know you were ill. . . ."

She gave me a rueful smile. "I wasn't—when I talked to you on the phone. It happened rather suddenly. But I feel much better now."

"Your maid acted scared," I said.

"Jessica is new, and rather high-strung. She was here when it happened. I—I'm afraid I frightened her. But it is nothing, really. Afterwards, I told her that I was expecting you, and that she should let you in. Perhaps I was a little impatient with her. She wanted to call a doctor."

She smiled at me, but I thought that her eyes looked frightened. I couldn't think of anything to say, so I nodded politely and waited.

"You see, Mr. Bennett, after I talked to you, I had Jessica bring in some burgundy—in honor of your visit, you know. While I was waiting, I poured a glass for myself. I had just tasted it when it began—pain and a feeling of nausea. But I won't bore you with the details. I'm quite all right now, only I'm afraid it spoiled our luncheon. I'll have yours served in here, and we can talk."

"Don't bother," I said.

On the low table beside the divan was a vase of flowers, a set of heavy bronze book-ends enclosing three bright-jacketed volumes, an ash tray filled with lip-stick-stained cigarette butts, a tall slim wine bottle and a partly filled wine glass. I picked up the glass and held

it beneath my nose. There was the rich aroma of good red burgundy—and something else. Into my mind flashed a picture of Dolores Santos lying dead on a bed upstairs in this house, and I remembered the same bitter scent in her cocktail glass.

I knew there was death in Ethel McKennah's wine glass.

CHAPTER IX

THE girl was watching me. Her eyes looked big and dark in her pale face, and in them there was still the shadow of fear.

I took the cork from the wine bottle and held the neck to my nose. I could detect no foreign odor, and I replaced the cork, put the bottle back on the table.

"Did you leave this room?" I asked. "After you poured the wine in your glass, I mean?"

Her brows furrowed faintly for a minute. "Yes," she said. "I did. I was called to the telephone."

"How long were you out of the room?"

"Three or four minutes—maybe longer."

"Would you mind telling me who called you?"

She smiled. "Of course not. It was Charles."

"Was it important?"

A puzzled expression crept over her face. Then she smiled again. "No—he just wanted to say hello, and that he wouldn't be home for dinner to-night."

"I see," I said. "Who was in the house—when you got the call from your husband?"

She said: "I don't understand. Why——?"

"Mrs. McKennah," I said, "I'm sorry to tell you this. You may think

that you had a simple stomach ache, that perhaps the wine, or something, didn't agree with you. But I think you should know for your own protection that somebody put poison—arsenic—in your glass of burgundy."

Her lower lip began to quiver, and she turned her face away from me.

"Who was in the house when you went to the telephone?" I asked again.

She turned her face slowly towards me, and her lips appeared whiter than ever. "Just. . . just Jessica, and the cook, Mildred, in the kitchen. But they wouldn't. . ."

"Any body else?"

"Oh, yes—Nick—Mr. Angelico—was here for a little while. He left just before you came. He—he wanted to talk to me about Dolores. . . it was quite a shock to him."

"I see," I said. "What did you want to talk to me about? Feel like telling me now?"

"I almost forgot," she said. "I've been thinking about myself, when it's Charles I'm worried about."

"Why?"

"He's been acting queerly—not like himself. I'm afraid something is seriously wrong that he is keeping from me. And then this morning the police called about the car, and they told me about Roger. And that ghastly business about Dolores last night . . . what's going on? I thought perhaps Charles might have told you something . . ."

I thought fast, tried to decide whether or not to tell her about my deal with Hot Shot. I decided not to. I couldn't see that it would do any good, and would only worry her more.

"No," I said. "He didn't say anything to me."

But she was staring up at the ceiling with vacant eyes, and appeared not to have heard me. I cleared my throat.

"Dolores," she said. The word was almost a whisper. "Dolores died from poisoning . . . arsenic. . ."

"Don't worry about it," I said. "You didn't get enough to do any real harm. In the meantime—"

She looked at me quickly.

"—in the meantime," I said, lamely, "watch yourself. Maybe it would be a good idea if you had someone—a friend or relative—come in and stay with you.

"And don't mention this to anyone, just yet. Not even your husband. Okay?"

She nodded her head eagerly, like a little girl.

"Do you mind if I take the wine along with me?" I asked. "I'll need a small bottle for the wine in your glass—I want to keep it separate, for analysis."

"I suppose there are bottles in the garage. I'll send Jessica—"

"Never mind," I told her. "I'll go. Be back in a minute."

SHE started to protest, but I went out the way I had come in, leaving the door ajar so that I could come back in without ringing. As I walked around the house I saw that Alec's laundry friend had gone away and Alec was standing on the corner all alone beneath a bus stop sign. He was reading a newspaper, and he never moved or changed his position when I came into his view. He kept right on reading.

There was room for two cars in Hot Shot's garage, but only the big black Cadillac was there when I went in. I closed the doors of the garage behind me and slid behind the wheel. The seat was adjusted too far forward for my long legs, and I sat there in the gloom with my stomach against the steering wheel and thought a little while. Maybe Rockingham's witness had made a mistake in the license number, I thought, and then I remembered

that I had myself seen the car sliding away through the traffic. It could easily have been Hot Shot's car, this very car I was sitting in, but I couldn't be sure—I could have been mistaken. There was more than one black Cadillac in Cleveland.

I got out from behind the wheel, and hunted around the garage for a small bottle. I found one partly full of turpentine. I poured the turpentine down a drain in the middle of the garage floor and rinsed the bottle at a faucet along the wall. Then I went back to the house. Alec was still standing across the street intently reading his newspaper.

Ethel McKennah was lying in the same position in which I had left her. She watched me silently as I poured the burgundy from her glass into the bottle and screwed on the cap. Then I picked up the almost full bottle of wine from the table.

"Mind if I take this along too?" I asked.

She shook her head. "Of course not."

"Try not to worry," I said. "And be sure and get someone in to stay with you for a day or two. It might be a good idea to have a doctor check you—just in case."

She gave me a wan smile. "I will," she promised. "And thanks for coming out." Fear was still flickering in her eyes.

I went out and got into my coupe. I drove slowly past the spot where Alec was standing. The light was changing to green and as I shifted gears I looked straight ahead and said, "Stick around."

Alec didn't look up, but he turned a page of his newspaper. I knew that he had heard me.

I drove straight to a commercial laboratory operated by a guy I knew and who had done a couple of rush jobs for me in the past. His place was on the

north side, close to the lake. They gave me a quick analysis of the contents of both the wine bottle and the small bottle which I had filled the wine from Ethel McKennah's glass. In the big bottle there was good burgundy—nothing else. But I shivered when they gave me the results of the tests on the wine from the glass.

It was loaded with enough white arsenic to kill three people.

CHAPTER X

THINGS were piling up kind of fast, and I still had a lot of unfinished business to attend to. I hunted up a pay phone and called Detective Sergeant Rockingham.

"Rock," I said, "do you know anything new on that shooting last night?"

"Jim, I've been trying to get you," he complained. "Don't you ever stay in your office? Listen, watch your step. They was gunning for you last night—Duncan just happened to get in the way."

"How do you figure it?"

"The slugs they dug out of Duncan were fired from Duke Mossburg's gun. He missed you last night, so he tried again today."

"How do you know he wasn't after both of us?" I asked. "Anyhow, if it was Mossburg, he wasn't alone last night. There were at least two people in that car. Is your witness still sure about that license number?"

"Yep. And we're on McKennah's trail. Any reason why McKennah would want you bumped off?"

I was beginning to wonder about that myself, but I said: "Hell, no, Rock. I think you're barking up the wrong tree. McKennah's an old pal of mine."

"You hope," he said, grimly. "Now how about you telling me a couple of things."

"Nothing to tell. I'm doing a little snooping on my own. If I run into anything, I'll let you know."

"I just know you will," he said in mincing tones and hung up.

I grinned to myself and looked up Roger Duncan's home address. I was surprised to find that he lived in a house on one of the side streets off the Heights. I had expected him to be living in an apartment, or hotel. I jotted down the address, got into my coupe, and headed east again. On the way I stopped at a diner and picked up two beef sandwiches and some coffee in a cardboard container. When I reached Hot Shot's neighborhood I circled a block beyond his house, parked, and walked down to the corner.

Alec Hammond had shifted corners, but he was still standing there watching the traffic go past. I looked at my wrist watch. Going on to three o'clock. The afternoon was getting along. I pulled my hat over my eyes and walked past Alec. He didn't look in my direction, but I knew that he saw me.

"Around the corner," I said, without looking at him.

I walked on around the block and when I got back to my car Alec was sitting in it and finishing up the second sandwich. I got in beside him.

"Hey," he said. "I thought you was going to watch the joint while I was gone."

"Never mind," I said. "It don't make much difference now. But I want you to stick around for a while yet."

Alec's hat was on the back of his head, and his red hair hung over his forehead. He gulped the coffee, mumbled, "Damned near starved. Thought you was never coming."

"Anything happen?" I asked.

"Naw. Not much. Grocery truck, laundry truck, dairy truck. And a big guy went in at eleven-forty-two. He

left just before you got there at twelve-o-six. Nobody else in or out."

"A big guy with blonde hair?" I asked.

"Yeah. Good clothes, too." Alec finished his coffee and lit a cigarette.

"Okay," I said, pressing the starter button of my coupe. "Stick on it for a while yet. If anybody comes out, follow them. You got a rod?"

Alec's freckled face broke into a grin, and in one swift motion his hand shot beneath his coat and suddenly a little stubby-nosed .32 lay in his palm. He flicked open the cylinder and I caught the faint clean odor of fine oil.

I nodded. Alec replaced his little gun in its holster and patted his coat with a satisfied grin. He got out of the car and stood on the curb looking in at me. "You gonna let me know when I can quit?"

"Yep," I said. "I'll be back."

HE AMBLED back up the street, and I drove away. My first stop was the Erie Hospital. There was a nice looking young fellow standing beside Roger Duncan's bed when I went in. On a stand was a box of candied fruit and a carton of cigarettes. Some freshly cut flowers were in a vase on the dresser. There was a card attached. When I went past I read the writing on the card. It said: *Get well quick. Ethel.*

Duncan looked a little better, and his eyes were calm. "Hello, Bennett," he said, weakly. "This is Don Fiske. He's at Northern Ohio too. Personnel."

I shook hands with the young guy. He said: "Have to get back to the office. See you later, Roger. If there is anything you want, just holler. Boss' orders, you know."

"All right," Duncan said. "Thanks for the smokes and stuff."

The young guy nodded at me and

went out. I said: "Feeling better?"

Duncan managed a slight smile. "Some, I guess. Doc says I'm doing all right—so far."

"Good," I said.

"Look, Bennett. I'm glad you came. I guess I was kind of wacky this morning when you were here. Forget what I told you about McKennah—and Ethel."

"You mentioned McKennah last night, too—right after they plugged you. Remember that?"

He sighed wearily. "Yes, I remember. Forget it, will you?"

He closed his eyes, and the nurse came in. She glanced at Duncan, and then nodded silently at me. I went out on tip-toe.

I found Duncan's house without any trouble. It was a small bungalow set back off the street. I parked my car a block away and walked back. I rang the bell, just to be on the safe side. Then I began to try the first of several special keys I carried. The second one worked, and I pushed the door open.

I went silently and closed the door behind me, locked it from the inside. I stood in a long, narrow living room with bare polished floors covered only by an occasional shaggy white rug. There was a fireplace at one end of the room and above it and on both sides were shelves filled to overflowing with books. There were two divans, a low cocktail table, several big easy chairs. I stepped over to the book shelves and looked at some of the titles. There were some modern fiction, a few classics, but the bulk of Duncan's library appeared to consist of technical volumes on engineering and biology. Two titles which caught my eye were E. M. East's *Biology in Human Affairs*, and Gruenberg's *Biology and Human Life*.

Beyond this main living room there was an alcove, with two doors leading

off it. I stepped to the nearest door, opened it. It squeaked loudly as I pushed it inward. In the quiet house the sound startled me, and I stood still for a couple of seconds. It was then that I heard the other sound.

It was a faint, lazy buzzing. It appeared to come from the darkened room into which I was looking. And then there was a slight rustling sound. And then silence. I felt the flesh tingle along the back of my neck as I stood there in the gloomy silence.

Carefully I felt along the inside wall for a light switch, but I couldn't locate it. I struck a match. Instantly the buzzing began, angry and loud. I held the match high.

I almost dropped it at what I saw.

CHAPTER XI

IT WAS a big snake, thick and dusty-looking. Its blunt head was raised from the bunched coils and a black forked tongue flickered out at me. The horny buttons on the end of its tail protruded from the coils and whirred dryly in the silence.

The rattler was in a glass-sided case, with heavy wire netting on top. There was sand on the floor of the case. I found the light switch then, and turned it on. There were other cases in the room, all around the walls. Some of them contained miniature water ponds in which small turtles drowsed or swam lazily about. There were frogs, mice, star-fish and a cage of guinea pigs. And in one small case in a corner, coiled on white sand, was a small brilliantly colored snake. Red and yellow and black. A coral snake. It was a duplicate of the one which had been placed in Hot Shot McKennah's desk.

I went out of the room, turned off the light. I still hadn't found all that I was looking for. I went through the

house—kitchen, bedroom and bath. Then I thought of the basement. As soon as I descended the steps, I knew that here was what I was hunting.

It was all there—16 MM sound projector, screen, recording apparatus, film splicer. It would have been a simple matter for Roger Duncan to record his voice on a strip of blank film and splice the strip into the middle of one of Hot Shot's films.

I turned off the lights, went back up the stairs and out the front door. The big rattler buzzed as I went past. I locked the door behind me and went down the sidewalk towards my car.

An old guy wearing a black and white peaked locomotive engineer's cap and overalls in the same design passed me. He turned into Duncan's house.

I walked back, yelled: "Hey!"

He stopped, turned, half stooping, and looked up at me from over his steel-rimmed glasses.

"Mr. Duncan isn't home," I told him.

"I know it," he said.

"He's in the hospital," I said.

"I know it."

"Okay." I grinned at him. "You live here too?"

He pulled out an enormous bunch of keys and carefully selected one. "You're kinda nosey, young fella, but just to put your mind at ease, I'll tell you. I take care of Mr. Duncan's fire for him, and I look after his animals. Is that all right with you?"

"Sure is," I said. "Aren't you afraid of that big rattler in there?"

"George? Heck, no. George wouldn't hurt me—he knows me. I bring him rats. Live ones. But I have to bring the little one mice."

"What happened to the other little snake?" I asked.

"Alice? Oh, she died yesterday. Mr. Duncan said he buried her in the back yard. She couldn't get along with Al-

fred. Mr. Duncan said Alfred killed her."

"Too bad," I said.

"Yes, it was," he said seriously. "Alice was the purtiest, too."

"Well, so long," I said, and I walked down to my car. I looked back and saw the old guy go around to the side of the house and unlock a door.

WHEN I got back to the office I found Sandy Hollis sitting at my desk with the telephone to her ear and writing on a pad. She winked at me as I came in and kept on writing.

"All right, Chief," she said. "Thank you very much," and hung up.

"Sarasota?" I asked.

"Yes sir. Just got the call through. Talked to the Chief, himself. Here's the dope: it seems that Nicholas Angelico is kind of a big shot down Sarasota way. Owns a flock of orange, lemon and grapefruit groves. Big home on the Gulf. Proprietor of *The Gulf Stream*, a snooty establishment on the Tampa road. Married. Two children. No police record. A solid citizen of Sarasota County, according to the Chief."

I said: "Huh-huh. Anything else?"

"A check for five hundred dollars arrived from Mr. McKennah."

I looked at my watch. The afternoon was about gone. "Lock the safe and put on your duds," I said to Sandy. "We're going out to dinner."

"Mr. Bennett, is this strictly business?"

"Half and half." I grinned at her.

"Shucks," she said. "I was hoping it was purely pleasure."

She dabbed some powder on her short, straight nose, re-painted her lips, pulled a cute little brown hat over her bronze hair, put on a gabardine topcoat, picked up a brown leather purse and said: "Let's go. I had a date, but I'll

stand him up."

I shook my head. "Don't kid me. Just mention food, and you women are all alike."

She laughed, and we went out, locked the office. We hit the street in the middle of the late afternoon traffic, got into my coupe and headed southeast out of Cleveland.

"Where are we going?" Sandy asked. "Or is it a secret?"

"My child," I said, "we're going to a clip joint called *The Midway Inn*. It's about six miles out on the Youngstown road, and it is owned and operated by one Nicholas Angelico, the Big Shot of Sarasota. All sorts of dreadful things go on there—gambling and drinking and wild parties."

"Oh, fun," she said. "Can I play the nickel slot machine?"

"Sure. If you hit, you can buy me a drink."

A half hour later, at dusk, we saw the lights of *The Midway Inn*. It was a long, low rambling structure made of yellow sandstone, quarried, I figured, up around Berea. A big, blinking red neon arrow jabbed constantly at a lighted sign which read: *The Midway Inn. Dining and Dancing. Cocktails*. I pulled into a parking space beside the building, and Sandy and I went in.

There was a check room presided over by a good-looking girl wearing a tight black silk dress and too much make-up. She took my hat and coat, gave me a check, and we walked through an archway into the main room. There were thick rugs, soft lights, a small band playing slow blues, a small polished dance floor, white-covered tables, gleaming silverware, the pleasant smell of food and liquor, a mammoth mahogany bar banked by a rainbow array of bottles and glasses. Half the tables were filled with dinner patrons, and the bar was lined solid

with pre-dinner drinkers. A waiter came up and asked if we had reservations. I shook my head, and he led us to a small table along the wall.

SANDY ordered a Martini, and I told the waiter to bring me a double Manhattan. Then I looked over the room again. At one side of the orchestra platform there was a heavy, ornate door. In front of the door stood a tall, thin bald-headed man in a gray double-breasted suit. He just lounged there against the wall, smoking and watching the crowd.

Sandy said: "My, my. Cocktails and everything."

I waved a palm. "The sky's the limit."

Our drinks were brought, and we talked, had another drink, and then ordered dinner. Sandy was a pleasant companion, and I caught more than one male eyeing her healthy good looks. I found myself enjoying the drinks, the food, Sandy's companionship—until I remembered what I had to do before this evening was over.

While we were eating I noticed that people began to go through the big door guarded by the bald-headed man. I watched the procedure. He either smiled and ushered them in, or there was a short delay while identification or membership cards were apparently displayed. As we finished our coffee, I saw that all but a few tables in this outer room were filled, and I knew that a great many persons had gone directly into the room beyond the big door. If this was a sample of his nightly trade, Angelico had a gold mine.

"Come on," I said to Sandy. "We'll try and get past the watch dog."

The bald-headed man saw us coming. He moved six inches nearer the door and flashed a perfect set of store teeth on us.

"Good evening."

"I'm a friend of Nick's," I told him.

"Can we go in?"

"Certainly," he smiled, and I could see the fake pink of his gums. "May I see your card?"

"No card," I said. "Sorry."

He narrowed his smile down. "Just a minute," he said, and pressed a tiny button beside the door.

We stood there maybe two minutes before the door opened and Angelico stepped out. He was wearing a double-breasted tuxedo, a soft white shirt, and a narrow black tie.

"Well, Bennett," he said. "Glad you came. Come on in."

"This is Mrs. Hollis," I said. "My secretary."

"Pleased," he said, bowing slightly. "The place is yours."

I thought his smile was a little strained, his actions a little jerky. I could have been wrong, but I was suddenly glad for the pleasant weight of my .38 beneath my left arm. We went in. As we passed the bald-headed man I could see his bright pink gums again.

Sandy Hollis took in eagerly every detail of the big room in which we found ourselves. There was every imaginable type of gambling device, from crap tables to roulette wheels. The place was jammed with people anxious to risk their money.

Angelico said: "Make yourselves at home. I'm busy right now, but I'll be free in a few minutes. The boys tell me that they are hitting on number three crap table tonight." He winked at me, smiled at Sandy, walked across the big room and entered a door in a far corner.

I handed Sandy a ten dollar bill. "Here, amuse yourself. When that's gone, you can spend your own money."

She laughed, took the bill, and said: "I'll double it for you," and headed for the change-maker's window and a row

of slot machines along the wall.

I WENT over to the nearest crap table, waited until it was my turn for the dice, tossed twenty dollars on the green felt. The croupier began his chant, placed the dice in a leather cup and threw them out against the back board. A seven came up. Before he could rake them in I picked the dice up and rolled them between my fingers.

"Dice, please," the croupier snapped.

I tossed them to him, said: "Shoot the forty."

He tossed the white cubes out over the felt. Six. He tossed them again. "Six is the point," he chanted, tossed the dice again. Seven. I walked away. I had found out what I wanted to know, and I made a mental note to include the twenty on my next expense report.

I found Sandy Hollis busily pulling the handle of a dime slot machine. "If you don't see me in fifteen minutes, come over to that door in the corner and knock—loud. Got it?"

She turned to me, her eyes sparkling. "Yessir, Jim—I mean, Mr. Bennett."

I winked at her and walked through the crowd to the door in the corner. I was in luck. The door wasn't locked. I didn't knock. I walked right in and looked around.

Angelico was sitting behind a big glass-topped desk. In front of the desk stood a man, his back towards me. He was a thick, stocky man with short legs. He was leaning over the desk towards Angelico, and one fist was on the desk top.

Angelico saw me first. He took his gaze from the other man's face and watched me silently, a slow smile forming on his lips. Before the stocky man turned to face me, I knew that it was Hot Shot McKennah. And as quickly as I recognized him, I knew that he recognized me.

CHAPTER XII

I CLOSED the door behind me. "Hello, Hot Shot," I said. "I wondered if I'd find you here."

He needed a shave, and there were deep shadows under his eyes. His whole face looked puffy, gray.

"Jim," he said, and he lifted a hand, dropped it helplessly.

"Trying your luck again?" I asked.

Angelico pushed back his chair, got to his feet. "Go ahead, tell him, Charles. He's a pal of yours. Maybe he'll help you out."

Hot Shot jerked his big head at Angelico. "Shut up, Nick. He knows about the money I owe you." He swung his head back towards me. "What are you doing here, Jim?"

I finished that job for you," I said.

"Who—?" he began, and then glanced at Angelico. "Never mind, Jim. Tell me about it later."

I shrugged. "You know that the cops are hunting you?"

He stared at me, and his whole body seemed to sag. He said one word: "Why?"

"They say that Roger Duncan was shot by a person or persons riding in your car."

Suddenly Angelico laughed. "My, God," he said. "What next? Charles, your time is running out. I want that money by tomorrow noon. If I don't get it, I'm going straight to the board of directors of The Northern Ohio Electric Company. I've given you every opportunity, every consideration. Now I'm through waiting."

I glanced at Hot Shot. He was still trying to put up a front, but his eyes looked scared. He took a broken cigar from a vest pocket and gazed at it. Angelico picked up a full humidor from his desk and held it out to Hot Shot. "To hell with you, Nick," Hot Shot

said, and stuck the broken cigar in his mouth.

"Did you lose the money at the crap tables?" I asked Hot Shot.

He chewed on his broken cigar. "Yes, mostly. How else would a punk like him get into me that deep?"

Angelico leaned across his desk, a wicked light flickering in his blue eyes. "Why, you cheap—"

I cut in. "Angelico, I suppose you took the precaution to get a signed note from this sucker?"

He tapped his breast pocket with a long forefinger, and his white teeth flashed. "Certainly. What kind of a business man do you take me for?"

"Business man?" I snapped. "It's robbery. That crap game of yours is crooked as hell. I thought you were smarter than that. I haven't seen sawtoothed dice since my high school days. Give me that note."

I moved clear of the door and let my right arm swing free. But Angelico didn't make a move. He just stood there glaring at me, his handsome face slowly reddening. Hot Shot sighed heavily and sank into a chair in front of the desk.

Angelico's lips curled. "Bennett, for a two-bit dick you talk big. I'll give you just two minutes to get out of here. And take your, ah, secretary with you."

"I want that note," I said.

There was a loud knock on the door. I moved backwards, opened it without taking my eyes from Angelico. I said: "Wait outside, Sandy."

A woman's voice gasped: "Charles!"

I SWUNG my head. It wasn't Sandy Hollis. Ethel McKennah stood there staring at her husband. Hot Shot looked up at her, his broken cigar hanging loosely from his mouth. "Ethel," he said. "What—?"

"Hello, Ethel," Angelico said. "This

is getting quite chummy. You may as well know, too. It's all in the family. Your loving husband owes me thirty-four thousand dollars, and I want it."

Ethel McKennah took a step forward. "Charles, why didn't you tell me? We could have worked it out somehow. I want to help you. Why didn't you tell me . . . ?"

Hot Shot lowered his eyes. "Ethel, I've been a damned fool."

She turned to Angelico. "Nick, you can't do this. We'll pay you, somehow. The house is in my name, and I've got an insurance policy—"

Hot Shot broke in. "No, Ethel. That's yours. I got myself into this, and I'll get myself out."

"How?" Angelico sneered. "What's your house worth? Twenty thousand? Is it clear?"

I was getting restless. I had a nasty job to do, and I wanted to get it over with. Now was the time, made to order . . .

From out in the gambling room a woman screamed. A man's voice barked: "Line up, folks!"

The door swung open, and Sandy Hollis burst in, her bronze hair faling across her face. "Jim!" he gasped. "It's a hold-up!"

I wheeled towards the door and came smack up against a big man with a big .45 automatic in his fist. The blue steel muzzle was rammed against the fourth button of my vest.

"Back, bud," he said, and grinned at me, showing strong yellow teeth in a broad swarthy face.

I stepped back. The gunman swung his automatic in a quick circle. Then he spotted the safe in the corner. "Ah," he said, and shouted over his shoulder: "In here, one of you guys." His quick, gleaming dark eyes fell on Angelico. "The boss man, huh? Ain't that nice? I'll start with you. Shell

out."

Angelico made no move. The gunman bared his teeth and took a quick step forward, grabbed Angelico's coat, ripped it open, took a thick wallet from the inside pocket. "Hold out your hands," he said.

Angelico stood still, made no move. The gunman swung his big .45 in a quick arc, ripped the muzzle across Angelico's cheek, said: "Hold out your hands."

Silently Angelico held his hands in front of him. There was an ugly white gash on his cheek and the blood oozed out in irregular drops. The man with the gun ripped a heavy gold ring from the gambler's finger, unbuckled the strap of a gold wrist watch, and dropped them both into his pocket. He turned to Hot Shot, prodded him with the gun. "You're next, Shorty."

Hot Shot was still sitting in the chair. With trembling hands he took a wallet from his pocket and handed it over. The gunman laughed, pocketed the wallet, and turned to me.

I was ready for him.

"Come on, fatso. Shell out."

"Okay," I said. "But be careful with that rod. It makes me nervous." I reached up beneath my coat.

Maybe he was a little too sure of himself, or maybe he was just careless. My .38 slid smoothly into my hand and when the muzzle cleared my coat it was spitting lead. In that split second of time I saw dismay, fear and hate in the gunman's eyes, and his big .45 blasted out in a thunderous roar. But he was too late. Two of my slugs were already in him, and he lunged forward, stumbling, trying vainly to raise the muzzle of his gun. He squeezed the trigger twice more before he hit the floor, and the slugs buried themselves in the thick carpet. I had to move my feet fast to avoid his hurtling body.

Ethel McKennah screamed, and then there was another figure in the doorway. Too late I whirled. The bullet from the second bandit's gun nicked my chin, and I hit the floor like a bag of hammers.

CHAPTER XIII

I WASN'T out—I just seemed to have momentarily lost the use of my legs, and my head felt as though my brains were loose in my skull. But even while I was falling towards the floor I caught a glimpse of Sandy Hollis' hair flashing in the light and I saw her arm hurling something heavy over her head, like a Greek statue of a javelin thrower. There was a dull-sounding thud, and a crash followed by a groan. I raised my head from the rug. Gunman number two was flopped in the doorway. There was a heavy brass smoking stand lying across his body.

I looked up at Sandy. She stood poised behind Angelico's desk, and in her raised hand was a heavy electric clock, the cord and plug dangling. Her gray eyes were almost black with excitement.

I got to my feet. My chin was dripping blood, but I didn't feel so bad. A little groggy, but not too bad. "Nice going, Sandy," I said, and even as I spoke there came a rapid hammering sound of gunfire from out in the club, followed by three peculiar flat explosions. I jumped to the door.

People were milling around and scrambling along the walls trying to get out. The center of the big room was clear, except for the still body of a man lying against a leg of one of the roulette tables. He lay on his back, and there was a ragged, bloody hole beneath his left eye. Across the room, close to the entrance to the bar, lay another body, face down, arms and legs twisted.

In the doorway to the bar stood a tall, lean smiling figure. His hat was on the back of his head, and a strand of red hair hung down over his freckled face. He was smiling happily, and there were dancing lights in his eyes. In his right hand, close to his side, he held a short-barreled gun, and he stood with his legs apart.

I held a handkerchief to my chin and walked across the room. "Alec," I said, "I'd know the sound of that .32 of yours anyplace. Still using soft-nosed slugs?"

Alec Hammond blew into the stubby nose of his little revolver and grinned at me. "Yep," he said. "Best thing in the world for squirrels and big bad hold-up men."

I grunted. "You never shot a squirrel in your life. Did you follow Mrs. McKennah here?"

He nodded, his bright gaze still flickering around the room. "Yeah. She left the house a little while ago and came straight here. I saw your car outside, so I waited. While I was waiting I saw these four boys go in. They were acting kind of tricky, so I followed them in, easy-like."

"And a good thing," I said. "Nice work. Stick around. Maybe you better call the cops. Try and get Rockingham."

He nodded said, "Okay, Jim," and walked out into the bar. I started back towards Angelico's office. A little man stopped me. "Say, mister, will we get our money back?"

"Sure," I told him. "Stick around until the cops get here."

I walked into Angelico's office, still holding my .38 in my hand. Angelico was bending over the body of the big gunman, and he had in his hand the wallet which the gunman had taken from him. I lifted a foot and kicked the gambler squarely between the shoul-

ders. He grunted and pitched forward, still clutching the wallet. I stepped in quickly, batted him across the back of the head with my gun and twisted the wallet from his grasp. He swayed groggily on his hands and knees.

I OPENED the wallet, found the note signed by Hot Shot. Angelico hadn't been lying. It was made out for thirty-four thousand dollars, payable on demand to Nicholas Angelico. I handed the note to Hot Shot, who still sat in his chair like a man stunned. He wiped his face with his hand, and a diamond ring on his finger glittered in the light. He took the note, mumbled: "Thanks, Jim."

I leaned down and took Hot Shot's wallet from the coat pocket of the dead gunman. I opened the wallet. It contained exactly fourteen dollars—two fives and four ones. I tossed the wallet into Hot Shot's lap.

"You were willing to sacrifice all of fourteen bucks to make this shake-down look good, weren't you?" I said. "And I notice that they didn't take *your* ring, or your watch. You're a bigger sucker than I thought—trying to pay some hired hoods to take this joint, and then split with them so that you could pay off Angelico with his own dough—and whatever they took off the customers. Even if you didn't get it all, you figured that you could clear enough to keep Angelico quiet for a while. I played square with you, Hot Shot, but from now on you're on your own."

He just sat with his head down, breathing heavily.

From across the room Ethel McKennah said: "That's not true, Mr. Bennett. Charles wouldn't do a thing like that."

I didn't answer her. I was watching Angelico, who was slowly getting to his

feet. He stumbled over to the desk, and slumped into a chair.

"Keep your hands on top of the desk," I said to him.

Obediently he placed both hands on the glass top. "I suppose I ought to thank you, Bennett," he said.

"I don't think so," I said. "This rat trap is going to be boarded up. You'll have to go back to your wife and kids and your orange groves and start being the big shot of Sarasota County again. By the way, does your wife know about your carryings-on up here?"

"Bennett, you're being offensive."

I knew I was offensive. I wanted to be. And I intended to be more offensive. But I wasn't interested in Angelico's reactions to my remarks. I was watching Ethel McKennah. Her eyes were on Angelico, and her red mouth was suddenly ugly.

"Wife," she said, and her lips curled. "Nick, you never told me—"

He shrugged his big shoulders. "Why should I tell you, Ethel? I thought you knew—What difference does it make, Ethel—to you and Charles?" He laughed shortly, a quick, unpleasant laugh.

Ethel McKennah's whole body began to quiver. She seemed to have forgotten the presence of her husband, Sandy and myself. Her eyes were on Angelico, and all of her features were contorted.

"Laugh." She almost spat the word at Angelico. "Laugh, you double-crossing, woman-chasing wop. So you've got a wife. Well, listen to me, you cheap lady killer, you. You won't have your wife long. I'll tell the world about you, and me—and Dolores Santos. I'll shout it on the streets, and I'll tell it in court. You always said that I didn't have the nerve—that I was afraid of losing Charles, that our love was too

precious to take the risk. Charles! Look at him. Do you think that I want him—after this? You said that you would break Charles, ruin him, and then we would be married. What a joke! And I fell for it, like a silly fool. I'll—"

"Ethel!" Angelico slammed the desk with his fist. "Shut up. You don't know what you're saying. Bennett, get her out of here."

IT WAS then that she dived for him.

I saw the gleam of the slim-bladed knife in her hand. Angelico flung up an arm to protect himself, but the knife flashed down and there was the sudden bright spatter of blood on the desk. I jumped up, grabbed Ethel McKennah's arm, twisted it until I thought her wrist would snap. And then the knife fell to the floor, and I got one arm beneath her chin. She screamed and cursed and tried to bite me, but I managed to drag her clear of Angelico. I threw her into a chair, and suddenly she sat still and buried her face in her hands.

Angelico, half out of his chair, leaned on the desk and blood dripped slowly from a long cut over his eye. He pulled out a handkerchief and held it to his head. He didn't say anything. Hot Shot sat like a man in a dream.

I picked up the little rapier-like knife, handed it to Sandy Hollis, and turned back to Ethel McKennah.

"Mrs. McKennah," I said. "We may as well get this over with. Can you hear me?"

She nodded her head, and didn't look up. She looked small and young, huddled there in her chair, with her smart college-girl clothes and her yellow hair shining in the light. I almost felt sorry for her—until I remembered a few things.

I took a deep breath. "You killed

Dolores Santos because she knew about your affair with Angelico. And you were jealous of Dolores, and Dolores was probably jealous of you—that's why you were afraid she was going to tell your husband. You didn't want that, because you weren't sure of Angelico, and you didn't want to divorce McKennah until you had Angelico sewed up. And you couldn't be sure of him as long as Dolores was alive, and as long as you didn't have Angelico all to yourself you intended to hang onto McKennah. So, after Duncan and Angelico left last night, you went to Dolores' room, put arsenic in her cocktail, and placed a vial of arsenic in her purse to make it look like suicide. Only you filled the vial too full—it was too full for any to have been taken out. Do you see your mistake now?"

She didn't answer, didn't look up at me. She kept twisting her fingers in her lap, like a little girl who has been caught stealing cookies.

"That was the beginning," I said. "I was next on your list because you suspected that McKennah had hired me to check on you—or maybe you guessed that the fake suicide gag didn't fool me. So you hired Mossburg—you probably became acquainted with him here at this club—to kill me, and you took your husband's car and drove Moosburg past my apartment. Only he got Duncan instead of me, and so you had him try it again at my office the next day. I know you drove your husband's car last night because when I got behind the wheel today the seat was adjusted too far forward for the average man, even a short-legged man, to drive comfortably.

"Yesterday morning you called my office, before Mossburg got there, and left word for me to call you. That helped your alibi along—in case you needed one. But when I called you,

alive and healthy, you knew that Mossburg had failed again, and so you tried to throw me off the scent. You asked me to come out to lunch. And you had the stage all set. You wiped off your lipstick in order to appear pale and sick. But the lipstick gave you away. You forgot to throw away your freshly smoked cigarette butts. I saw them in the ash tray. They had lipstick on them. You were afraid that I suspected that Dolores' death was not suicide, and so you loaded your glass with arsenic to make it appear that Dolores' murderer was after you, too. You even invented the telephone gag to maybe drag your husband into it. I think that's all. If it isn't enough, I can probably think of more."

I stopped talking. The office was silent, except for a faint scratching sound. I looked at Sandy Hollis. She had found some paper, and was busy making notes with a fountain pen. Angelico sat silently, still holding the handkerchief to his face. Hot Shot sat in his chair, his elbows on his knees, his head in his hands.

Ethel McKennah broke the silence. "It's all true," she said, dully. "It don't make any difference now. I'm glad I did it. I don't care what happens to me now . . ." Her slim shoulders shuddered, and she began to sob quietly.

Hot Shot made a kind of a strangled sound.

I turned to meet Sergeant Rockingham.

CHAPTER XIV

HE STOOD in the doorway, big and raw-boned and behind him in the gambling room I saw the blue coats of his crew. Through the archway I saw Alec Hammond standing at the bar, a glass in his hand. He was laughing. The customers who had remained were

standing around in little groups, talking and watching the policemen.

"There you are, Rock," I said. "Mrs. McKennah engineered the shooting last night and today. Mossburg was her hired gun. She also poisoned Dolores Santos. My secretary took it all down, and she'll send you over a typed confession in the morning for Mrs. McKennah to sign. Do what you like about McKennah and Angelico. They're both clear on the Santos murder and the shooting Mrs. McKennah fixed up for me, but McKennah is mixed up in this hold-up—he was trying to raise money to pay a gambling debt to Angelico. But Angelico's games are crooked. Take your choice—it's about fifty-fifty. Let the sheriff of Cuyahoga County worry about that.

I motioned towards the three dead gunmen. "As for these hoods, it's good riddance."

Rockingham gave me a sidelong leer. "All very pretty, ain't it? You told me last night that the Santos gal killed herself."

"I changed my mind," I said. "I'm going home now. I'll tell you all about it in the morning."

"Sure, sure," he said. "I can hardly wait." He turned and began barking orders to his men.

Sandy Hollis and I went out to the bar. I said to Alec Hammond: "Nice work tonight, Alec. Come around to the office in the morning and I'll give you a check."

"All right, Jim. But it won't be early. I've got some unfinished business to attend to." He held up his glass.

I crooked a finger under his necktie and flipped it out of his vest. "Okay, gum-shoe. And thanks for everything."

"A pleasure," he grinned, and bowed his red head at Sandy.

As we drove back towards Cleveland, Sandy said: "A nice, quite dinner date.

You must ask me again sometime. Only remind me to bring my bullet-proof vest and a sack of hand grenades."

I laughed, but I didn't feel like laughing. The whole business had left me with a bad taste in my mouth. "The evening isn't over yet," I told Sandy. "We've got one more stop to make."

WHEN we got into Cleveland, I drove to Erie Hospital. Visiting hours were over, but they let me see Roger Duncan for a few minutes. He was lying quietly, his eyes open. I introduced Sandy, and he smiled.

"Duncan," I said, "this won't take long, and then you can go to sleep. You're jealous of your boss, McKennah, because he married your girl. It's been eating at you for a long time, and when a guy gets like that he sometimes does crazy things—like putting snakes in people's desks and sending threatening notes and splicing a death warning into a film's sound track. You wanted to puncture McKennah's smugness, strike back somehow. You know now that that's silly kid stuff, don't you?"

For half a minute Duncan didn't say anything. Then he smiled faintly, and said: "You really are a detective, aren't you? You're right. I've been acting

like a crazy fool. Maybe I was a little crazy—crazy jealous. Yes, I did all those things. But it's all over now. Lying here in bed, I've had time to think it all out, and I know that she wasn't worth it. I—I loved her very much, and when she married McKennah I thought I'd go crazy. Maybe I did, a little. And McKennah kept rubbing it in. . . . but I'm all right now. When I get out of here, I'm going away. To the coast, but not to work for McKennah. I'm going to get into biology—the thing I like."

"Good," I said. "I'm glad to hear it."

Sandy and I went out. "No use telling him now, about Ethel McKennah, and the rest," I said. "He'll find it out soon enough."

"What are you mumbling about?" Sandy asked.

"People, and stuff. I'll tell you all about it."

"Tomorrow," she said. "On the Agency's time. Take me home now. I yearn for the peace and quiet of my lonely room."

I took her home. Then I went to my apartment and stirred up three Manhattans.

I drank them all before I went to bed.

The End

THE GOLD BRICK SWINDLE

By

JAMES RUEL

IT IS hard to believe that anyone could be duped into buying the Brooklyn Bridge or some gold bricks, but curious as it may seem, there are cases on record dealing with frauds such as these. What is probably one of the most incredible "gold-brick" case in the police files occurred in the year 1929 to a wealthy widow out in Big Spring, Texas. The sixty-nine-year-old woman had come into her great fortune when oil was discovered on her 23,000 acre ranch—and the story of it was well known throughout the state.

Among those who had become fascinated by the tale and attracted to the widow's fortune as a bee to honey was a man referred to as Tanner.

He hoped to talk his way into the running of Mrs. Robert's finances, but the woman was shrewd enough to decide that things were going well enough without his help. Despite the fact that she didn't enlist the dubious services of Tanner, she was very friendly and took him on a tour of her property. One of the points of interest she brought to his attention was the spot known as Signal Hill. She told him a legend that the former owners of the property had told her. It was believed that the wealthy Spaniards who had lived in the vicinity of Signal Hill back in 1835 had buried immense treasures there, when they had fled into Mexico during the war in which Texas

had won its independence from the country south of the border. Some people still believed that the Spaniards never got the chance to return to Signal Hill and that the buried treasure was still there. Tanner, taking careful note of the story, asked Mrs. Roberts whether she knew any details about the type of treasure that the Spaniards had buried. It was thought to be in the form of gold and silver bars.

When Tanner left the ranch that afternoon, Mrs. Roberts never expected to set eyes on him again. A full three years passed before he returned; this time the Reverend Doctor J. B. Bryant, an American minister who had done missionary work in Mexico, was with him. In reality, Bryant was far from the type of man he represented. Tanner was his nephew and the two had hatched a scheme whereby they hoped to play upon Mrs. Robert's pious nature to gain her confidence and then relieve her of the bulk of her fortune.

The man who was masquerading as a minister claimed to have met some Mexicans who were the rightful owners of maps which had come down to them from Spaniards who had buried the treasure on Signal Hill almost a hundred years before. The only factor which stood between Mrs. Roberts and the maps was a mere \$1,600, their purchase price. The words of the minister were accepted as truth and the widow promptly handed over the money. Three days later she received a very convincing call from Mexico telling her that Bryant was arranging the final sale of the maps. In the meantime his partner was busy at the Acme Brass Foundry in San Antonio. He ordered two roughly cast bars of brass about the size of ordinary building bricks made up in a crude manner so that they would appear to be of primitive manufacture. After obtaining the bars, Tanner subjected them to a heat-and-chemical process to age them artificially.

LATE the night before the two crooks were due at the Robert's ranch house, they secretly tunneled their way through one side of Signal Hill planting the two bronze bricks. On that fateful morning in September of 1932 they worked their first of a long string of frauds on the unsuspecting Mrs. Roberts. She fell into their wily trap "hook, line, and sinker." Using the maps that the Reverend had had made up for the occasion, Tanner and his uncle put on an impressive show as they consulted the directions on the fraudulent parchment and struck off so many paces to the north, so many paces to the west, and then finally arrived over the spot where the two brass bricks had been planted. The Reverend prefaced the digging operations with an appropriate prayer and the bricks were unearthed.

Mrs. Roberts hopes to convert the "gold" into cash immediately were put at an end with a timely suggestion from Tanner. He warned her of the

excitement such news would create in that part of the country, and she agreed to hoard the metal until such time as there would be a large enough quantity of it to make a trip to the government mint in New Orleans. In the meantime Mrs. Roberts was to furnish the cash with which the Reverend Doctor Bryant would return to Mexico and purchase further maps. The two swindlers assured the gullible Mrs. Roberts that it would take at least two years of almost constant work to locate all of the treasure buried on Signal Hill. And so the treasure hunts continued.

The price of the maps doubled and then tripled as time went on. The stack of bricks of brass and silver mounted higher and higher. During the third year of operations, Mrs. Roberts was paying as much as \$15,000 for a single map. It was at this time that her daughter-in-law arrived for a visit and happened to spy the Reverend and Tanner busy at work when she had a movie camera in her hand. Without their knowledge she obtained two hundred feet of film which she intended to entitle "Treasure Hunt on Mama's Ranch." The film lay undeveloped and forgotten until 1939 when it became a most incriminating bit of evidence.

BY THE middle of 1935 Tanner and Bryant could no longer put off the shipment of bricks, which now the widow believed to have the total value of at least three million dollars. They staged a convincing display, shipping the bricks by truck, and then having it hi-jacked. The question of notifying the police about the hi-jacking was, naturally brought up by Mrs. Roberts. Tanner counseled her against the plan because, as he put it, the U. S. Government would probably deal very harshly with anyone who had been in possession of three million dollars in gold and lost it. Tanner sold her on the idea that she had not lost her own property, but government property—for all gold had previously been called in by Uncle Sam and, had the bricks been real, Mrs. Roberts would have been open to at least a technical charge of hoarding the precious metal.

Mrs. Roberts was hoodwinked by these two crooks, not for a period of months, but years. It was not until the Secret Service agents and Intelligence Unit agents began to examine Tanner's income tax records for 1933, 1934, and 1935, and then keep track of his activities and lavish expenditures that the truth came out in the open. It took the Federal investigators only a short time to locate the place of origin of the brass bricks—the Acme Brass Foundry in San Antonio. The movie of the treasure hunt that Mrs. Roberts' daughter had taken furnished the positive identification of the swindlers. On the last day of January, 1940, Tanner and his uncle, who had posed as the Reverend Bryant, pleaded guilty to criminal evasion of income taxes. They were sentenced to penitentiary terms and heavily fined and penalized.



Because his interest was solely on that cigar, the corpse went undiscovered

You Smoke Too Much

by H. B. Hickey

"S O. DR. RAINEY, you were looking for me?"

The doctor whirled, startled, as the gray haired man came out of the underbrush along the path. The unlit cigar the doctor was holding dropped from his fingers.

It was Morton Bennet's greeting rather than his sudden appearance, which caused his agitation. It had been years since Bennet had called him by other than his given name.

Rainey grunted. "Yes, Morton, I was hoping to find you. I wanted to know what you were going to do. But I can tell by your tone that you've already made up your mind."

Bennet nodded. "I admit the decision was not made without sorrow. It isn't easy to refuse a man who has been

your friend for years."

"Then why do it? The money means so little to you and so much to me. I admit I made a foolish investment, but after all I *am* your friend. How can you turn me down?"

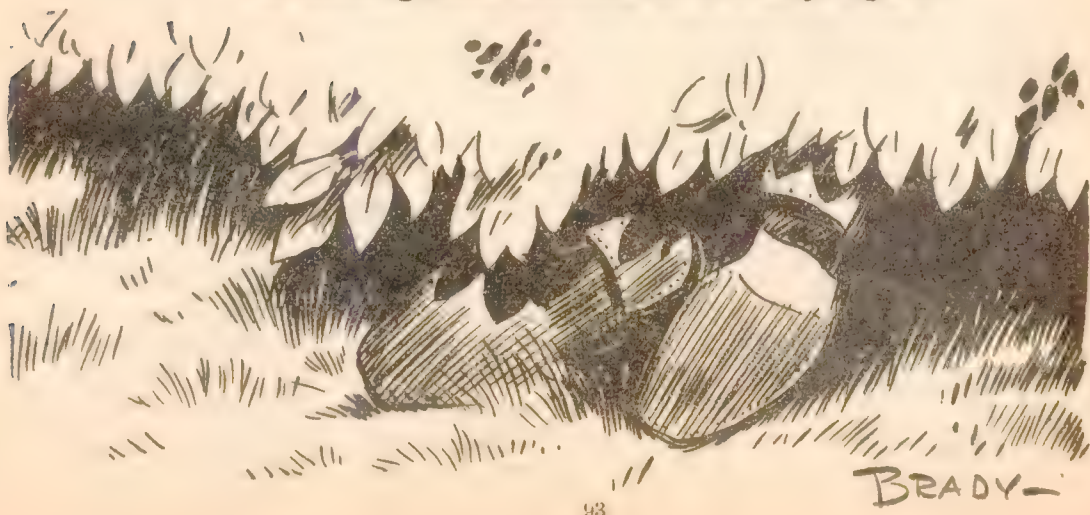
Bennet quoted Spencer, "The result of saving people from their folly would be to fill the world with fools.' I'm very sorry, doctor, but those are my principles and I must adhere to them."

Rainey reddened in anger. "I know your principles only too well! They're just the ones a money-making robot like you would have. There isn't a bit of humanity or gratitude in them!"

Bennet was shocked. "Gratitude? For what? I've paid you well for whatever services you've rendered me."

"How can you speak of pay?" The

All men acquire bad habits during a lifetime. But Rainey made the error of mixing two—murder and costly cigars



doctor was bitter. "How could you ever repay me for the times I've saved your life by keeping that rotting heart beating?"

Thin lips grew thinner as Bennet replied. "Now don't become emotional. You know I've left you a good round sum in my will."

"A lot of good that will do me! I need money soon. I've already mortgaged my home and I wouldn't have come to you except as a last resort. Now once and for all, will you help me?"

Rainey drew a handkerchief from his pocket and pretended to mop his brow. He was careful not to press it too hard.

Bennet stared at him. "You know that once I've made up my mind nothing can change it. My decision is final." He turned in a gesture of dismissal and bent to re-enter the little side path that was faintly visible through the overgrowth.

Quickly, the doctor pressed the handkerchief hard. He could feel the ampule within its folds crush under the pressure. Two short steps brought him over the crouched figure and with a single motion he brought the unfolded kerchief around the throat and held it tight against Bennet's nose and mouth.

It was over in a moment. Rainey could feel the other go limp in his arms. He lifted Bennet slightly and dragged him through the bushes. There was a small ravine filled with tall grass within fifty yards of the main path and it was into this he rolled the body. The grasses hid it from view.

The doctor retraced his path, carefully checking to see that he had left no clues. There was always the chance that a bit of cloth had been caught on a brier but he could find none.

He selected a spot farther down and slightly off the main path to burn his

handkerchief. He ground the bit of ash into the dirt with his heel until no trace remained. That done, he walked back for a final check. Then he continued his walk, calm and unhurried.

Twenty minutes later a hobo made his way slowly along the same path, stopping often to admire a clump of wild flowers that grew along its borders. The twittering of the birds were his music and he gave them rapt attention, identifying each by the melody. He was a true nature lover who would not have traded his lot with the richest man on earth.

The tramp's eyes lit on the cigar butt with pleasure. It lay fresh and unsmoked beneath a cluster of hydrangeas. He swooped on it with a murmur of joy. "Aha! Just the thing to follow my midday repast." Carefully he tucked it in his coat pocket.

Later, on the beach not far away, he took from the same pocket the sandwich he had begged earlier that day. The cigar came out with it, to lie half buried in the sand, hidden from the careful search he made for it.

"What a shame," he reflected. "It looked like a beauty, too."

However, he was not one to grieve long over any loss. The cigar was forgotten by the time he had left the beach a mile behind . . .

"HELLO, Davy-Boy!" The old man's voice was little more than a hoarse whisper and his eyes were rheumy as he stared up at the lanky reporter. "Got something for me?" he asked.

Meers grinned. "Do I ever forget you, Pop?" He pulled open his coat and showed Pop the half-pint bottle in his inside pocket.

The old man reached for it greedily. He had been night custodian of the county morgue for longer than Meers .

could remember. Originally he had secured the job through politics but he held it through many changes of administration. Nobody else would take it!

He was a rumpot and Meers had found that by oiling him with a bottle now and then he sometimes came up with a hot tip.

"How's the job, Davy-boy?" Pop asked.

"As dead as yours, you old drunk, but not as smelly." Meers still could not repress a shudder at the sight of the refrigerators banked against the walls with their row on row of metal handled drawers. And the smell wasn't Chanel No. 5, either.

Pop took a long pull at the bottle. "What can I do for you this lovely evenin'?"

"You can give out with some news if you've got any," Meers told him.

"Not a thing stirrin'," the old man said. "Been kinda dead lately." He grinned toothlessly at his joke.

The reporter pulled a toothpick from a row of them in his hatband and stuck it between his teeth. "Well," he said, "I was just passing by and thought I'd stop. What's the latest in stiff's?"

The old man's voice echoed through the dimly lit room. "Got one in tonight that'd been out in the woods for four days. No identification on him, but you can take a look if you want to."

Beers looked glum. "I don't want to but it might just turn out to be someone I know."

Pop pulled out a slab. "He looks pretty good for four days. Usually the flies would have got to him but lately there ain't been many."

The reporter studied the corpse with distaste. The man looked about fifty-five or so. The hair was gray and thick, the nose long and aristocratic. The body looked like it had been well fed

and cared for in life.

"Nope," the reporter decided. "Never saw him before. What did the coroner have to say?"

Pop rattled it off glibly. "Death from apparently natural causes. No marks of violence. If body remains unidentified it will be interred in potter's field."

"The meat wagon brought him in about two hours ago," he finished.

"No identification, eh?"

"Nope. His suit had the tailor's label in it though. Probably be able to trace him. If not I told the boys I want the suit. Just about fit me."

"Ugh!"

"Why not? That's how I get all my clothes."

The reporter started to go but the old man called him back. "Wait! I just thought of something. It's about that stiff you just looked at."

Meers came back. "So you've been holding out on me."

"No, honest. Just slipped my mind. Might not mean anything, of course, but then again it might."

"O.K. Spill it."

"Well, about an hour ago a girl came in. She looked about twenty-five or so. Kind of pretty in a hard way, if you know what I mean. She wanted to know if she could look at some of the stiff's that were brought in the last few days.

"I told her she could. She looked scared but game. I pulled out a couple and she made herself look at them. But none seemed to mean anything until I got this last one out.

"When she saw him she kinda jumped. She opened up a locket she had around her neck and compared the picture in it with the guy on the slab.

"I asked her if he was the one she was lookin' for but she didn't answer. Before I could get another word in she turned around and ran out."

Meers thought that over for a few seconds. "What do you think? Was he the one?"

"Hard to tell. She didn't look the way people usually do when it's someone in the family or even someone they know. She didn't cry or even seem sad. Just surprised, sort of."

"Could have been relief that he wasn't the one she was looking for," Meers suggested. "But I think I'll stop down at headquarters and see if they've got anything more on him yet."

As he drove he reflected that it probably didn't mean much. But he couldn't afford to pass up the chance that it did.

MISSING Persons hadn't a thing on the dead man. No one of that description had been reported lost, strayed or stolen and that was all the bureau cared about. Meers tried Homicide since they had the coroner's report.

Luckily Lieutenant Gellet was on duty. He was a small man, dark, with intent features and eyes that always looked tired. Since the *Clarion* had given him a big writeup in the Acton case he was always ready to cooperate with their reporters. He had little behind him but political pull and needed all the breaks he could get. Only a few reporters and the men under him knew that, however. The public knew only what it read in the papers.

He smiled up at Meers. "How are you, Dave? Haven't seen you around for a long time."

"I've been busy," Meers told him. "Can you do me a little favor?"

"Anything within reason," Gellet assured him. "What is it?"

"I'd like to see the coroner's report on that man who was found in the woods this evening." He gave Gellet the number which had been on the tag attached to the body.

The lieutenant went into the next room and came back in a moment with the report. It was disappointingly short. Pop had given Meers about all the information it contained. The reporter handed it back.

"Nothing on this that I didn't already know. Maybe you can give me some dope. Who found him?"

"A couple of Boy Scouts on their way home from a hike. They phoned headquarters and we had the boys in the district send out the wagon." He stared at Meers. "Why? You got something on it?"

The reporter told him what Pop had said about the girl and the lieutenant shook his head. "Might not mean a thing. We'll probably identify him in the morning as soon as that tailor opens up. Then we'll have more to go on."

"Okey doke," Meers told him. "Let me know if anything worthwhile breaks."

He started to leave but the ringing of Gellet's phone halted him.

"Wait a second," the detective called. "It's for you. Sounds like he wants to tell you a secret."

Meers scooped up the phone and receiver in one hand. He held the receiver against his ear with his shoulder and kept the other hand free in case he had to write.

It was Pop. "Davy-boy?" the old man whispered.

Meers assured him it was. "Well, listen," Pop said, "you know that guy you looked at when you were here? Now there are two guys who just came in. They're awfully interested in him."

"Try to hold them there till I get down," the reporter told him. The old man hung up.

Meers slammed down the phone. "You better come with me," he said to Gellet. "That was Pop, at the morgue. He says there're two guys down there

who are giving that corpse the once over."

Gellet grabbed his hat and at the same time yelled for his driver. The driver, in the next office, dropped the magazine he was reading and scurried out.

"Get that car going in a hurry," the lieutenant told him. Then to Meers, "Who the hell does that old guy think he's working for, the *Clarion* or the county?"

"The county only pays his salary, I bring him booze," the reporter grinned.

WITH the siren going all the way it took the squad car only ten minutes to cover the distance Meers had driven in twenty-five.

Pop was waiting for them at the door. "They're still here," he whispered. "Back there at the ice-box."

The two men were intent on comparing the dead man with a photograph they held and did not hear Gellet and Meers coming. When Gellet said "Hello!" in a loud bark both men jumped. They spun around, one reaching for his hip pocket.

The lieutenant had his gun out. "Hold it!" he warned. "So far we've got nothing on you but if you try to pull that gun we will have."

The other's hand dropped. "Oh," he said. "Copper, huh?"

"That's right. Now how about you? What makes you two come out here so late at night to look at a corpse?"

The taller of the two dipped a couple of long fingers into his pocket and hauled out a folder which he handed to Gellet.

The lieutenant stepped back a couple of paces, still keeping the gun in his hand, and opened the folder. It identified the tall man as Fred Borden, Simplex operative. Simplex was a country-wide private detective agency.

Gellet tossed the folder back and Borden caught it and returned it to his pocket. "How come," the tall man asked, "you're so interested in us?"

"I'll ask the questions," Gellet told him. "You forgot to answer the first one."

"Do we have to?"

Gellet's eyes got nasty. "You know you don't. But it never hurts to cooperate with the police."

Borden's partner interrupted. "The guy's dead, so what's it going to hurt if you answer a couple of questions? As far as we're concerned our job is over anyway."

Borden considered that. "Yeah, guess you're right." He looked at the gun in Gellet's hand. "You can put the cannon away. You just shoot whatever questions you want to ask at me and I'll try to answer them."

"First," Gellet told him, "I'd like to know who that man is." He waved his head in the direction of the corpse.

"That's easy; he's Morton Bennet." The private detective waited for the next one.

"Don't try to make this into a game," Gellet said. "Keep on talking until you run out of information."

"Sure. You know who Bennet is, don't you?"

"I've heard of him. Very wealthy, wasn't he?"

"That's right. One of those men who's really a millionaire. He's been retired from business for some years now, due to ill health. Well, four days ago he went out for his usual morning stroll through the woods near his home and he didn't come back.

"His secretary, a big guy who lived with him, got worried and went out to see what'd happened to him. When he couldn't find him he called a couple of neighbors to see if maybe the old man hadn't stopped by. But most of them

lived pretty far down and it wasn't likely he would have got that far; he couldn't walk very fast.

"The closest neighbor—he lives only a few hundred yards down the highway—is a doctor who was one of Bennet's best friends. He helped Phillips, the secretary, look but Bennet had disappeared as though the earth had swallowed him. There isn't room for a car on the main path through the woods near the lake there so it wasn't likely that someone had picked him up. But they called everyone they knew, anyway, just on the off chance.

"Then they really got worried. They began to figure it might be a snatch. Since Bennet always took the same path it would be easy for anyone to lay for him in the woods and grab him when he went by.

"Well, they were afraid that if they called in the police and he had been kidnapped the mob that did it would get wise and maybe get rid of him. So the doctor called the agency and they sent Novak, here, and me out to see what we could find out.

"We couldn't find a trace of him although we covered the ground pretty thoroughly. Then tonight we found out that a couple of kids had found a body in a ravine. The boys at the station told us it had been sent down here so we came out to see."

Borden showed the lieutenant the picture he had. "You can tell it's Bennet all right."

Gellet looked it over carefully and compared it with the corpse. "It does look like him."

Suddenly he snapped at Novak. "Why didn't his daughter tell you he was here?"

Novak stared at him. "His daughter? First time I heard he had one!"

"Maybe she was his wife."

"He didn't have one of those either.

He and the secretary lived in this big house with just a couple of servants. As far as we could find out Bennet had no relatives at all."

"I see. Anything more you can think of?"

Both men shook their heads in the negative. "O.K.," Gellet told them. "You can go if you want to." They went out fast.

The lieutenant looked for Meers and found him busy at the phone.

"Had to call the paper in time for the morning edition," the reporter explained after he had hung up. "What are you going to do now?"

"I think I'll have the doc come out and hold a post mortem. I wouldn't feel right if I didn't."

THE girl drove slowly although she had been over the same road twice that day. At intervals she fingered the locket that hung from her neck.

At last she came to the driveway she was seeking and rolled the car through the gap in the tall hedge that bordered the estate. The drive curved gracefully between rows of poplars toward a large home. There were lights in several rooms to indicate that despite the lateness of the hour someone was awake. The night was very warm and there were windows open.

The girl rang the bell and in a moment the light over the door went on. It disclosed her to be a tall young woman, rather flashily dressed. Her rouge had been applied with too heavy a hand and her mascara accentuated too well the hollows under her eyes.

She stared suspiciously at the stocky figure who opened the door. "Aren't you going to invite me in?" she asked, as he hesitated.

"Forgive me," Dr. Rainey said. "I'm not accustomed to visits from young women this late at night. Won't you

come in, Miss Lucas?"

As she followed him into the spacious livingroom she looked about approvingly. "I still think you've got a swell place here," she told him.

"Yes, that's what you said this evening when you were here. I'm afraid that your long ride out here has been in vain. I still have no information about Mr. Bennet . . . that is—"

"Skip it!" she said. "I've got some for you. I just saw him—down at the morgue! I had a hunch that someone might have found him and brought him in so I took a flyer and went over to see. I checked with this picture in the locket and I'm sure it's him. He was found this evening."

The doctor closed his eyes and then opened them slowly. "Are you certain it was he?"

She removed the locket and handed it to him. "I had this besides the newer ones I've seen."

The doctor opened it and studied the picture inside. "Yes, it is a good likeness despite its age." He handed it back. "It must have been a terrible shock to you," he commented.

Her answer was blunt. "Why? After all, until a week ago I had never heard of him. I never saw him alive and I don't care if he's dead. I owe him nothing and I feel no loss. The only reason I'm at all interested in him is the money involved and I intend to get my share of that!"

She laughed shortly. "I suppose that shocked you! Still, if you were in my shoes you'd feel the same way."

He shrugged. "I'm not, though. At any rate you need have no fear that you will not receive what is coming to you. I would suggest, however, that you try to handle this discreetly. No purpose would be served by making a scandal."

Miss Lucas sized him up. "You wouldn't be trying to put something

over on me, would you? Maybe if I don't speak right up I'll lose out altogether."

He reassured her. "I have nothing to gain by cheating you. I am certain, though, that by handling this out of court a great deal of time will be saved. There would be no sense in tying up the estate in a long legal battle. You will probably be quite generous so that there will be no reason for anyone else to make trouble."

"You're a pretty smart cookie, doc. Sure I'd be generous; why not? There's enough for everybody and like you say, why start a long war? I'm the one who can least afford it. A week ago I was a chorus girl in a cheap dive off Broadway. Now I'm an heiress. So why should I be greedy? There'll be enough to go around, won't there?"

He nodded. "It would be hard to spend even half the money in one lifetime."

"So there!" She laughed. "He must have been a shrewd proposition to make all that dough."

"He was," the doctor told her. "He was one of the cleverest men I have ever met."

"I wondered," she said. "After all, you know . . . what kind of a man was he outside of that?"

THE doctor looked as though he were going to deliver a eulogy. His eyes rolled heavenward and his tone became solemn. "A fine man," he said. "A very kind one and a humane one."

"Stop, you're breaking my heart," she grinned. "You know something, though? I like *you*! You're a right guy." She came around the table and tried to lean against him. He could tell that she had stopped long enough on her way out to have several drinks. He stepped back.

"I happen to have a wife and two

children," he told her. "They're away for a few days but they'll be back soon. Even if I felt like engaging in an affair—and I assure you I don't—I wouldn't have the time."

She made a playful grab at him and he ducked back again. Her long nails caught the skin on his hand and produced a deep scratch.

She was contrite. "Gee, I'm sorry. I guess I had one too many. I better be going before I do something even worse."

She was a little unsteady as he held the car door open for her. She had dropped her purse and he picked it up and handed it to her. It was of cheap patent leather.

"You'd better be careful how you drive," he warned her.

She waved back at him as the car roared off. Life had never seemed so good to her as it did at this moment.

The wind made a hushing sound through the woods that flanked the road and beyond the trees she could hear the waves sloughing against the lake shore. She slowed down to enjoy better the warm moonlight and the sweet scents that the breeze brought.

At intervals there were paths which led down to the beach and on a sudden whim she turned and let the car roll down the incline toward the water.

There was a small weather-beaten pier projecting a little way into the water. She got out of the car and took off her shoes. The sand felt cool to her bare feet. Water lapped against the piles invitingly and she walked out onto the pier and sat down to let her feet dangle.

Suddenly she rose and began to strip off her clothes. There was little to remove. The sign which said: NO SWIMMING had gone unnoticed.

Her dive was clean and she hit the water with barely a splash, outstretched arms cleaving it. A rock which lay be-

neath the surface grazed her fingers and she tried to turn, but too late. Her head struck it a glancing blow and the force was great enough to stun her momentarily.

There was a nausea and a dizziness, a rush of water into her mouth and nose. For a brief second she struggled. Then her thrashing stopped. There was left only the sound of the wind and surf. The few bubbles which had come to the surface quickly washed away . . .

THE coroner walked toward Meers and Gellet. He was a man grown fat on the ease of his job but his jollity was merely a defense against the daily horror of it. He was shaking his head slowly from side to side.

"Nothing, eh, doc?" Gellet asked him.

"Not a thing. Of course it isn't always easy to tell after four days but I'd bet that it was a natural death. His heart was in terrible shape. There was positively no sign of violence and if he was poisoned it was with some drug which left no trace."

Gellet said, "Hmmm," and the doctor laughed.

"Looks like I upset a theory. Well, I should think you get enough of murder so that you won't miss one." He rolled down his sleeves and got into his coat. "Better luck next time."

The lieutenant drove Meers back to headquarters and watched him get into his car. He stuck his head through the open window. "It's funny," he told the reporter, "how sometimes you get a hunch that there's something wrong. I've still got that feeling."

Meers agreed. "I've got it, too. If anything turns up you let me know, will you?"

Gellet said he would.

. . . It seemed to Dave Meers that he had been sound asleep for only a

little while when the phone rang. A quick glance at the slowly lightening sky told him that it had indeed not been more than two or three hours at the most.

He snatched up the phone and mumbled a sleepy "hello."

It was Pop and he was excited. "Get down here quick as you can," he said.

"What's up?" the reporter croaked, but the old man had already hung up. It took several seconds for Meers to connect the call with the events of the evening. Once he had grasped its possible significance, however, he moved fast.

His collar was still unbuttoned as he got his coupe rolling. At this hour traffic was practically non-existent so he disregarded stop lights. From the hotel where he lived to the morgue was only a five minute ride at the rate he was going. He was out of the car before it had stopped rolling, and just as he got his foot in the door Pop started talking.

"Well, she came back," he informed Meers. "Only this time they carried her in!"

It took a little while for that to simmer through and the reporter looked blank.

Pop explained. "The girl who was here last evening to look at Bennet. A prowler found her body a while ago."

"Where did they find her?"

"About a mile from Bennet's home. They were rolling along the highway when they saw a car on the beach with its lights on. At first the boys almost passed it up. Thought it was just a couple necking. Finally they decided to have a look.

"The car was empty; just a pair of shoes on the running board. On the pier they found a dress and her underthings. There's a big sign that says no swimming because it's very rocky along there and the boys got worried. They

got a couple of flashlights and went hunting for her. She had been washed up on the shore just a little way down."

"How'd you get all this?"

"From the coppers who brought her in."

"Did they find anything besides her clothes?"

"Her purse. It had her driver's license and a social security card. She was from New York. Her name was Ann Lucas and from the looks of her car, the boys said, she must have driven in."

"What else?"

"Well, it looks like she drowned, but there's a lump on her head that the doc said could be either from hitting a rock or else she could have been knocked unconscious and then thrown into the water."

"Does Gellet know about this?"

"He knows about her being brought in but he doesn't know who she is. I called you the minute the cops left."

Meers was thoughtful. "If she's from New York she probably got herself a room. Unless she registered under a fake name it should be easy to find it."

HE DIALED the *Clarion* office and got the night editor. In as few words as possible he described the girl and gave her name and home address.

"Get some men on the phone and start a check of the hotels," he said. "Then call me back. I'll be at police headquarters."

He found Gellet in when he got there. The lieutenant looked up in surprise.

"I thought you'd be asleep," he said. "Nothing new has come up on that Bennet case yet."

"That's what you think!" Meers cracked. "Got the report on that girl who was picked up in the lake?"

The detective's eyes narrowed. "How do you know about that? It isn't an hour since they brought her in."

"Don't get sore, but it's Pop again. He called me as soon as your men left."

"All right, so I'm not sore. What about her? The doc says she drowned."

"Maybe she did; he ought to know. But Pop says she's the one who came in last night to look at Bennet's body. You can't tell me there isn't something fishy about this!"

Gellet had not waited for him to finish. His chair was still turning when he came back with the report. He read it over to make sure he had not missed anything on his previous reading. When he was finished he looked up.

"I'll say there's something fishy! There's a sales slip in her purse from a New York store that's dated only four days ago! That means she just got in town.

"It's pretty queer that a girl comes into town and heads right for the morgue to find just the man she's looking for! I'm convinced now that she was looking for Bennet.

"Now, just a few hours later we pick her up in the lake! Well, maybe Bennet died a natural death and maybe she did too, but I'm going to look into this further!"

Gellet twirled in his chair as the phone rang. He listened for a moment and said, "He's right here." He handed the phone to Meers. "We ought to charge you for the service," he cracked.

It was Hollis, the night editor. "Listen," he said, "we've found that hotel. You want us to send someone over there?"

"No," Meers told him. "I'll handle it myself. Which one is it?"

"The Bleakstone. You sure you won't need any help?"

Meers hung up without answering.

Gellet was bitter as they headed north toward the hotel. "Maybe we ought to close the department and let

the *Clarion* take over. They handle these things more efficiently than we do."

"Don't complain," Meers told him. "If anything comes of this I'll see that you get all the credit for it."

The desk clerk was very helpful after he got a peek at Gellet's badge. The Bleakstone was not one of the better hotels. It catered to the theatrical trade.

"Miss Lucas registered this afternoon and went out soon after. She hasn't come in yet," the clerk told them.

"I know that," Gellet said. "We want to see her room.

The man behind the desk got out her keys and called over the house detective. "Will you please take Lieutenant Gellet up to 325?"

They followed the dick over to the elevator and rode up with him. He unlocked the door and waved them in ahead of him.

"Someone has beat us to it!" Meers announced over his shoulder.

THE room had received a thorough going over. There was no closet but the wardrobe in the corner had been opened and the garments it contained scattered on the floor. The reporter picked one up and noted that the label was that of a chain of low-priced stores.

The girl's suitcase was open, its lining torn. The floor around the dresser was littered with both clean and worn feminine undergarments. Even the bed had been pulled apart. The sheets were in a heap beside it and the mattress was on its side, leaning against the wall.

Gellet cursed fluently. "For once," he said, "the *Clarion* came in second!"

The lieutenant examined the lock in the door. He grunted disgustedly. "A kid could open this with a hairpin!"

They rode back down. The desk

clerk watched them with bleary eyes as they came toward him.

"You look like you got bad news," he observed.

"Never mind what we look like," Gellet told him. "Has anyone else been in that room since Miss Lucas left?"

The clerk pondered that awhile. "Nope," he decided. "Not that I know of. The maid goes in there only once a day, and that's in the morning."

"How about phone calls?" Meers asked him. Gellet gave him a dirty look.

"I was going to get to that!" he barked.

The clerk looked in the pigeonhole for room 325 and dug out a slip. "There was one call a little while ago from police headquarters, asking if she was registered here."

Gellet scowled at Meers.

"Then," the clerk went on, "a call came in for her at four o'clock this morning. No message."

"A smart character," Meers observed. "He wanted to make sure she wasn't in before he went up."

The lieutenant nodded sagely. "Just what I was thinking." He turned to the hotel dick. "Get that elevator boy over here for a minute!"

The kid looked nervous as he came to the desk. "Take it easy," Meers said. "We're just looking for someone who went up to the third floor a little after four o'clock."

The kid relaxed. "Gee, officer, that'd be hard to say. In this hotel people are comin' and goin' all night. You know, show folks."

"For some reason," the reporter told him, "I don't think this was a resident of the hotel."

HE LET the boy take his time. Finally something clicked. "Say! Just after four I took a couple of

drunks up to three. There was a guy who got off with them. He was awful nervous but I didn't think anything of it. A lot of these musicians here take a . . ."

The desk clerk interrupted. "Never mind about the musicians."

The kid caught on. "Yes, sir. Well, this fellow was really shaky. I hadn't seen him around before and come to think of it I did notice that he wasn't dressed like our regular trade. Most of them wear pretty loud stuff. This guy was dressed very neat, but not gaudy like the others." The boy paused and thought for a second.

"Oh, yeah!" he continued, "I noticed he had a close haircut! Show people wear theirs real long, you know."

"What color was his hair?" Gellet asked.

"Kinda dark. Black or brown; I couldn't see much under his hat."

"And what color hat was he wearing?"

The boy shrugged helplessly. "Honest, I didn't notice. I guess I told you everything I can remember."

Gellet told him he could go back to his elevator and turned to the clerk again.

"Maybe you noticed the same guy?"

The man behind the desk shook his head. "Sorry, lieutenant, but I didn't. He must have come in through the door to the restaurant next door. That's open all night."

Gellet constructed theories on their way back to headquarters. "Could be," he mused, "that she was some babe Bennet met while he was in New York some time. She wasn't bad looking, you know. She could maybe have got him to write her a couple of letters and then come out here to put the bite on him."

"Suppose someone told her Bennet

was missing and she decided to see what she could find out herself. She finds out he's dead. Then, let's say, she gets in touch with this guy, or whoever it was, and says she wants her dough anyway, or she'll raise a stink.

"The guy gets her to go out to the beach with him and conks her on the head and throws her in the drink. Then he comes out here and gets the letters she had in her room!"

"Hold your horses!" Meers laughed. "What kind of letters could he have written that would be so incriminating that this mysterious person would be willing to kill her to get? After all, Bennet had no family it seems."

The lieutenant was downhearted. "Well, I was only trying." A thought struck him. "Hey! Suppose she had a baby! See what I mean? It's his kid! Now a rich guy like that dies, he's got to leave his dough to *someone*. Suppose *you're* that someone!"

"The guy is dead and you're all set. to inherit a pile of money when along comes this babe with a new heir! Get it?"

The reporter was doubtful. "That might be it. But if it is, where's the baby?"

"How do I know? Maybe she left it in New York. I'm going to call there and see what I can find out about her anyway. We've still got her driver's license you know!"

"How about going out to Bennet's home to talk to his secretary?" Meers asked. "Maybe that would be an idea?"

"No maybe about it! That's the next thing on the list after I get that call through."

The reporter waited impatiently while Gellet got New York on the wire and told them what he wanted. They said they would do their best and he put down the phone.

"All set!" he told Meers. "Let's go. We'll be lucky if they get that stuff today."

THE day was pleasantly warm and as they drove along the lake front they could see bathers enjoying a morning dip. The sky, over the lake and away from the smoke pall that hung over the city, was a clear blue.

"People are crazy to go around killing each other when they could be having fun on days like these," Meers philosophized.

"If they didn't," Gellet told him, "we'd both be out of a job!"

"Of course," Meers reminded him, "this thing we're working on now isn't a murder yet. So far, the coroner says they were both natural deaths."

"It wouldn't be the first time he was wrong!" Gellet snapped. "Right now I think at least one of them was murdered and if I find a person I think did it I'll sweat it out of him!"

Bennet's home was surprisingly modest. There was a car parked on its gravel driveway, an old model Cadillac which had seen better days. The lawns looked as though they were tended in a servant's spare time.

They were admitted by an old man who took their hats and their names and ushered them into a walnut study. A man rose as they entered. The old servant announced them and left.

"You Phillips?" Gellet asked bluntly.

"No, I'm not," the other informed him. "I'm Dr. George Rainey. I was Mr. Bennet's physician and one of his best friends. I live just a little way down the highway and Phillips called me this morning to tell me the news. I came over at once to help him make the arrangements for the burial."

Gellet and Meers looked him over. He was stocky but not too short. His suit was dark and professional looking.

His hair, they noted, was blonde, and he needed a haircut. His hands were broad and the fingers long and capable. The nails were cut short. Meers noted the scratch on the back of the doctor's hand.

"It's a good thing you're here," Gellet said. "That saves us the trouble of going to your place."

The doctor raised his eyebrows and Gellet explained. "When a man as rich as Bennet dies in any way that's at all out of the ordinary we like to make an investigation."

The doctor raised his eyebrows and extracting a cigar from a silver case stared at the lieutenant.

"Out of the ordinary? I was told that he'd died from a heart attack. That was something we had been expecting to happen for a long time."

"That bad, eh?"

"Yes, indeed! We barely pulled him through the last one."

The doctor turned as someone entered the room through a door behind him. "Oh," he said, "it's you, Martin." He introduced the newcomer to the others. "This is Martin Phillips. Mr. Bennet's secretary."

Gellet's eyes flared. The secretary's hair was a very dark brown. And it had recently been cut!

"I was just telling the lieutenant," Rainey explained, "That Mr. Bennet was a very sick man, and that his death is not in the least unexpected."

"Phillip's hand shook as he lit a cigarette. "Did they think it was?"

"It's like this," Gellet explained. "When a man vanishes for four days and his secretary hires a detective agency to find him, the police get curious."

PHILLIPS was puzzled. "I was told that there had been a post-mortem and that that it was decided the death was from natural causes."

"All right, we'll skip that for a while. Now, what made you think someone had kidnapped him?"

"I should have thought that would be rather obvious! A very wealthy man disappears without a trace; his habits are such that it would be simple for a kidnapper to lie in wait for him. What should we have thought?"

"Well, at any rate, he wasn't!"

Phillips got a glint in his eye. "He could have been! Suppose someone had actually attempted it. The fright alone might have been sufficient to cause a heart attack which would be fatal!"

Gellet was easily distracted. "You could be right. Then when they saw he was dead they dumped him in that ravine!"

Meers shook his head. "After all, if the kidnappers were the only ones who knew he was dead, they could have collected just as easily as if he had been alive."

Martin Phillips stared at him respectfully. "I never thought of that," he said.

The lieutenant recovered fast. "The *main* point," he said, "is who gets the money and how much. If there's a crime there's a motive. And money is always a good one."

Dr. Rainey laughed. "There is enough money involved to have motivated a good many crimes. So far you've got enough motive but no crime!"

"Is that so?" Gellet roared. "Then how about that Miss Lucas who drowned at that beach near here? Who was she? Who cleared out her room?"

"There," Meers reflected, "is a copper who got his brains blown out and lived! If Phillips killed her, he'll be on guard. If he didn't know she was dead he might have spilled something. Now we're licked either way!"

He was wrong. Phillips took time

out to think and then brightened. "Oh, yes," he said. "Now I recall her. She came out here yesterday early in the evening and demanded to see Mr. Bennet. I couldn't get rid of her so I sent her to Dr. Rainey."

Phillips spread his hands. "Since Mr. Bennet's disappearance I've been distraught. Dr. Rainey is the one who hired the detective agency and has really been directing the search. I don't know what I would have done without him these last few days. Naturally, when I couldn't get this young woman away from the door, I thought of him."

The doctor was startled. "This is the first I have heard of her. Something must have changed her mind because she never showed up."

Gellet shook his head sadly. "I'm sure getting a lot of information out of you," he muttered. "Well, one thing you might know, to whom did he leave his dough?"

"There is a copy of the will in the safe. I'll get it for you."

PHILLIPS returned bearing a legal envelope. He handed it to Gellet. The lieutenant pulled out the enclosed papers and scrutinized them.

When he was finished he looked up. "For a legal paper it's pretty plain," he said. "Bennet left most of his dough to charities and a university. But there are a couple of small bequests to servants and friends. Then he leaves his telephone stock to Dr. Rainey."

"How much stock did he have?" Gellet asked Phillips.

"About eighty thousand dollars worth," the secretary told him.

The detective looked startled. "Say, that's a lot of money!"

"I can assure you I don't need it." The doctor barked. He bit his lip. He hadn't meant to say that.

Gellet continued. "The rest of the

estate goes to Phillips. And how much will that amount to?"

"Probably a hundred thousand dollars or more," Phillips informed him. "What does that prove?"

"It doesn't prove anything but it suggests that you had a pretty good motive to want Bennet dead."

Phillips almost laughed in Gellet's face but the ringing of the phone in the next room saved him. He hurried out.

"It's for you, doctor," he called.

While they were both out of the room Meers whispered to the lieutenant. "I'd like to search the house." The detective nodded.

As soon as Phillips returned the lieutenant put it to him. "We'd like to take a look through the house, if you don't mind."

Phillips hesitated and Gellet told him, "I can get a search warrant if I have to, you know."

The secretary shrugged. "Go ahead. I won't be able to help you, though. I've got to get tidied up. I haven't been getting much sleep these last few nights and I could use a cold shower."

He showed the lack of sleep. The hollows under his eyes were dark and his face looked drawn. Whether from strain or fear his hands trembled noticeably.

"We'll go up with you," Gellet volunteered. "We can start with your room."

The lieutenant gave the room a thorough going over but turned up nothing. Phillips was almost finished dressing when Meers and the detective got to the basement.

The furnace and hot water heater were oil burning and the basement was spotlessly clean. In one corner were stacked garden tools and near them several bundles of newspaper, neatly tied. It was the reporter who noticed that one of the bundles was clumsily knotted in contrast with the others.

"Wait a second," he told Gellet. "I want to look through this stack."

The lieutenant was indulgent. "You may as well. It'll only take a minute."

Buried deep in the bundle Meers found it. It looked innocuous enough, a large manila envelope crackled with age. The reporter opened it and took from within a smaller white one.

"Look at this!" he cried. "It's addressed: 'To Ann!'"

Gellet yanked it out of his hand. "That was the Lucas girl's first name! Let's see what's in it!"

THERE was but a single sheet of paper. The writing was neat and feminine. Addressed "Dear daughter," it went on:

"I have never told you this because as long as I was alive you had someone you could turn to for help when you needed it. When you read this I shall be gone and you will be alone.

"I never told you who your father was because he left me three months after we were married and eight months before you were born. But ever mindful of the fact that some day you might need him I kept track of him. I hope you may never need his help, but if you do, there is no reason for me to cheat you of it.

"These clippings furnish a record of his career since he left me. The picture in the locket was taken just before we were married. You can obtain a copy of our marriage license from the recorder's office at Danbury, Connecticut. My maiden name was the one we have used since he went away—Lucas.

"May the Lord protect you, Mother."

"What a scoop!" Meers crooned. Gellet had withdrawn one of the newspaper clippings. It was the report of a merger and carried a picture of Morton Bennet!

Gellet put the letter in its envelope and replaced it and the clipping in the manila cover.

"I'm going to have a little fun with that secretary," he leered at Meers. "This puts him right behind the eight ball!" He slipped the large envelope under his coat and held it there with the pressure of an elbow.

They found Phillips and the doctor waiting for them in the study. The secretary smiled as he noted they were empty handed.

"I see you didn't find whatever it was you were looking for," he remarked.

Gellet did his best to look glum. "No," he said, "but I'd like to ask you a few more questions."

"Fire away."

"Have you been away from the house in the last four days?" Gellet asked him.

"Not enough to speak of. I've stuck pretty close to the phone," Phillips replied.

"Let's speak of it anyway," the lieutenant smirked. "You managed to find time to get your hair cut!"

Phillips was ready for that one. "I hadn't had one for several weeks and after I got the news last night I realized I should have one if I were to look decent at the funeral. I drove downtown and found an all-night barber-shop."

"And then stopped at the Bleakstone?" Gellet suggested slyly.

Phillips turned pale. "I—I never heard of it," he said.

Gellet chortled, "Not much!" He pulled out the envelope he had concealed under his coat. "Then where did you get this?" he demanded.

The secretary's eyes were pools of fear, fixed on the object in Gellet's hand as though it were a cobra waiting to plunge its fangs into him. He tried to

lean on the back of his chair but his hand missed and for a moment he tottered before regaining his balance.

Gellet did not give him a chance to recover. He literally sprang at him, hurling accusations.

"Now I'll tell *you* what you did and *how* you did it!" He stuck a thick finger under Phillips' nose.

"Somehow you killed Bennet! Then, just when you thought you were all set to collect, his daughter showed up. But she was dumb enough to tell you she had her proof with her. You got her to go to the beach with you and hit her over the head and threw her in!

"Then you went to her room and dug up this envelope. You were probably in too much of a hurry to get back before someone found out you were gone to destroy it last night.

"So you hid it in that stack of papers. If I hadn't smelled a rat and got out here so early today you would have got away with it."

The lieutenant was almost drooling. "Now you're going to fry!"

PHILLIPS broke down completely.

He was sobbing as he talked. "All right, you've caught me! I did kill Bennet! I've always hated the filthy miser and only kept on working for him in the hope that some day he would die and I'd get what I had coming.

"But he didn't die and I got tired of waiting for that inhuman heart to stop beating. You can't know what it is to live with a man who hasn't a drop of warm blood in him, to be underpaid and overworked and to depend for your reward on a generosity that will come too late!

"I decided to kill him. Every day for the last two weeks I've been feeding him benzidrene, knowing that it would soon overstimulate his heart and kill him. At last it did and I can't say I'm

sorry!"

Now that he had got it off his chest Phillips stopped trembling. There was nothing more to fear. He continued his confession in a stronger voice.

"When his daughter came here yesterday and told me who she was I could have killed her, too. But I felt no hate toward her. I *did* send her to Dr. Rainey!

"That was the last I heard of her until you told me she was dead! However, she *had* told me that she had the complete proof of her claim with her and I surmised it would be in her room. She had told me where she was staying so that if anything turned up I could call her.

"I went downtown and had my hair cut as I told you. Then I decided to call her and tell her that her father was dead. When she did not answer the phone I took a desperate gamble and went to her room and searched it. I found the envelope under the mattress where she had hidden it but as you correctly deduced I was in too much of a hurry to get back. I didn't burn it."

He was breathing fast as he finished but some of the color had returned to his cheeks and his shoulders had straightened.

He stared at Gellet. "You *must* believe me! I did kill Morton Bennet and I'm not sorry! But as God is my judge, I did *not* kill Ann Lucas! I swear that the first I heard of her death was from your lips!"

Gellet shook his head. The secretary's sincerity was so apparent that it was almost impossible to doubt his statement.

"I suppose it's possible," the lieutenant speculated, "that you didn't kill her. She might have gone in for a swim and drowned."

He shrugged. "It doesn't really matter. The state can't execute you twice,

anyway."

The doctor had not moved a muscle during Phillips' confession. He seemed horror-stricken at the secretary's disclosures.

"I can't believe it of you, Martin; you've always impressed me as a fine person."

Dr. Rainey went to the secretary's side and put an arm around his shoulders. "I, for one," he told him, "am going to see that you get every chance to prove yourself innocent. Despite your confession there really is no proof that Bennet died from the effects of the benzidrene."

THE doctor turned away and picked up the cigar he had laid down. Carefully, he lit it, and then looked up at Gellet. "You really don't have any proof of that, you know."

The lieutenant was about to answer him when something caught his eye. From a corner of Martin Phillips' coat pocket a thin strand of gold dangled.

"Just a second!" Gellet barked. "There's one thing I forgot to do, search Phillips!"

As the secretary stared wide-eyed at him the lieutenant leaped to his side. Gellet's fingers dipped swiftly and grasped the thin gold chain. It was loose and followed his hand back up. At its end a small gold locket dangled! Gellet let out a yell of triumph.

"Aha!" he roared. "So you didn't have anything to do with Ann Lucas' death!" He stuck out his jaw at Phillips. "You almost had me believing that you really didn't kill her."

"But I didn't!" Phillips insisted. "This is the first time I've seen that locket. I don't know how it got in my coat pocket."

The lieutenant sneered. "Of course not! It got in there by itself!" He shook his free fist at the secretary.

"You got away with that innocent act once but it won't work this time!"

Meers tried to get a word in but Gellet paid no attention to him. "I know what's in that thing," he said. "A picture of Bennet!"

As the lieutenant reached out to grasp the locket Meers knocked his hand away.

"Don't touch it!" he warned. "You've bungled just about every other angle in this case. Now don't botch up the most important clue!"

Gellet's mouth opened foolishly. "What do you mean?" he asked.

"I mean that Phillips never put that in his pocket!"

Dr. Rainey interrupted. "And what if he did! It may not be the one Miss Lucas was wearing! Let's get a look at it."

Before Gellet could make another attempt to open it Meers grabbed the chain. Then he firmly loosened the lieutenant's grip on it and took it away from him.

"I'd better take this away before you smear it up," he told Gellet.

The reporter turned to Phillips. "Get me a small envelope," he ordered. When the secretary had complied Meers carefully dropped the locket in it and as carefully sealed it and put it in an inside pocket.

"Now," he sighed, "That's safe." He gave his full attention to the doctor.

"Too bad for you that Gellet didn't come out here alone," he told him. "You probably would have got away with that."

The lieutenant got red. "That's the second dirty crack you've made about me! You better explain yourself. What would he have got away with?"

Meers grinned. "He put that locket there when he was standing next to Phillips before! While he was telling him how he was going to help him!"

Meers laughed at Rainey. "You should never have tried that," he told the doctor. "The way you held the locket between your thumb and forefinger there should be a couple of swell prints on it!"

Gellet woke up. "So that's the way it was! Rainey was the one who knocked her off! Then when Phillips confessed to murdering Bennet he figured he could pin the other rap on him, too!"

THE doctor had not said a word while Meers and Gellet were talking. Now he spoke up.

"I found that locket outside," he said. "Then when I heard Miss Lucas had died I became afraid that I might be involved. I really did not mean to incriminate Phillips. My only thought was to dispose of the locket."

"I'm not so sure of that," Meers told him. "I am certain that Phillips didn't know she was dead, though."

"All right, wise guy," Gellet interrupted, "how do you know he didn't?"

"Because if he did he wouldn't have bothered to call her room before he went up there!"

The lieutenant gasped. "I never thought of that!"

"There are a lot of things you never thought of!" Meers snapped. "Just because Rainey said Ann Lucas didn't show up you took his word for it. Don't forget that he's got eighty thousand bucks coming, too. How do we know he doesn't need it? You took his word for that, too!"

The doctor had lost his air of assurance. "This is ridiculous!" he said.

"I'm not so sure," Gellet told him. "I think we'll have a fingerprint man go over Miss Lucas' car and effects to see if we can't find any that belong to you. Also I'd like to have a look at your bank balance. We'll see if you

need that eighty grand or not."

Meers broke in. "Ask him where he got that scratch on the back of his hand. It looks fresh."

Gellet gave the doctor a questioning glance but got a stony silence. "So you won't talk?" the lieutenant mused. "Okay, that's your privilege. But I think I'll take you in on suspicion of murder. Maybe that will loosen your tongue."

The four joined the driver in the lieutenant's car and they started back toward headquarters. For a few minutes nobody said a word. Then the reporter offered a suggestion.

"As long as we're out here we might have a look at the beach where Miss Lucas was found," he said.

"Good idea!" Gellet told him. "Could be we'll find a clue out there. It's only a half mile down the highway."

As they turned down the little side road that led to the pier Dr. Rainey broke his silence. "I haven't been down here for several years," he said. "There's no swimming. The pier is used by fishermen and I don't fish." He got out a cigar case and lit a fresh one.

The marks of tires were still visible in the sand but whether they were those made by the girl's car or by the police it was impossible to tell. Phillips and Dr. Rainey remained with the driver in the car while Gellet got down on his knees on the pier to examine it. Meers moved around the beach, poking into the sand every few feet.

The reporter suddenly stooped to pick up an object. Gellet had completed his unsuccessful search and was coming toward the car when he saw Meers straighten up.

"Find anything?" the lieutenant called.

"I certainly did!" Meers yelled back. "Come over here and take a look at it!"

The lieutenant's jaw dropped when

he saw what Meers had found. For a minute the two studied it in silence. Then Gellet took a sheet of paper and wrapped it around the object and placed it in his pocket. He and the reporter came back to the car and got in. They made no comment on their find and the others had been too far away to see what it was.

NEITHER Phillips nor the doctor evinced any curiosity. The secretary sat motionless in a corner, staring out the window as the car gathered speed. The doctor puffed violently at his cigar, sending a cloud of fragrant smoke eddying around the car and out of its open windows.

"That's a good cigar from the way it smells," Meers said. "What kind is it? I'd like to get some for myself."

"They're not on sale anywhere," Dr. Rainey informed him. "I have these made for me in Havana." He showed the reporter the band. It carried the maker's name, unfamiliar to Meers. There was also a number.

"I order them by number," the doctor explained. "There is no chance of mistakes that way." He offered one to the reporter and Meers accepted, but did not light the cigar.

"I'll save it till after lunch," he said.

Gellet grinned. "Take good care of it," he warned. "It would be a shame to lose such a valuable cigar."

Meers laughed and the doctor looked mystified.

"We found one just like it in the sand," Gellet informed him. "Considering that you say you haven't been out there in a couple of years you'll have to think up a pretty slick explanation of how it got there!"

The lieutenant's first act on reaching the bureau was to call in a fingerprint man.

"I want every print you can find on

that car or on anything that belonged to the girl," he told him.

Meers handed the envelope containing the locket to the man. "Better check this, too, Willis," he said, and the other departed.

"Now," the reporter suggested to Gellet, "you might have someone go out to the morgue and scrape that girl's fingernails. There might be a piece of skin under one!"

"I was just going to do that," Gellet assured him. He called in a plainclothes man and sent him off. "Be very careful," he warned the detective, "and then send it up to the lab. Tell them I want a report as soon as they're finished."

Dr. Rainey dropped his head. The mounting evidence against him would soon be overwhelming. To think that he had been so careful not to leave a trace of his crime! To have succeeded so well only irked him the more. It seemed that circumstance, aided by this bungling detective and snoop reporter, would convict him of a deed he had never done. . . .

IT WAS several weeks before Meers saw Gellet again. He found the lieutenant sprawled out with his feet on the desk, reading the afternoon edition of the *Clarion*. Gellet smiled up at the reporter.

"I see they found Rainey guilty of murdering Ann Lucas," he said.

Meers spit out a piece of toothpick. "Yeah, but that confession he made about knocking off Bennet sure gummed up the case against Phillips!"

"The way we figure that," Gellet explained, "is that Rainey figured he was sunk anyway so he tried to help Phillips out. I got to admit that it did put a crimp in our case but the D. A. says he'll have Phillips tried for attempted murder. That much his confession

(Concluded on page 178)

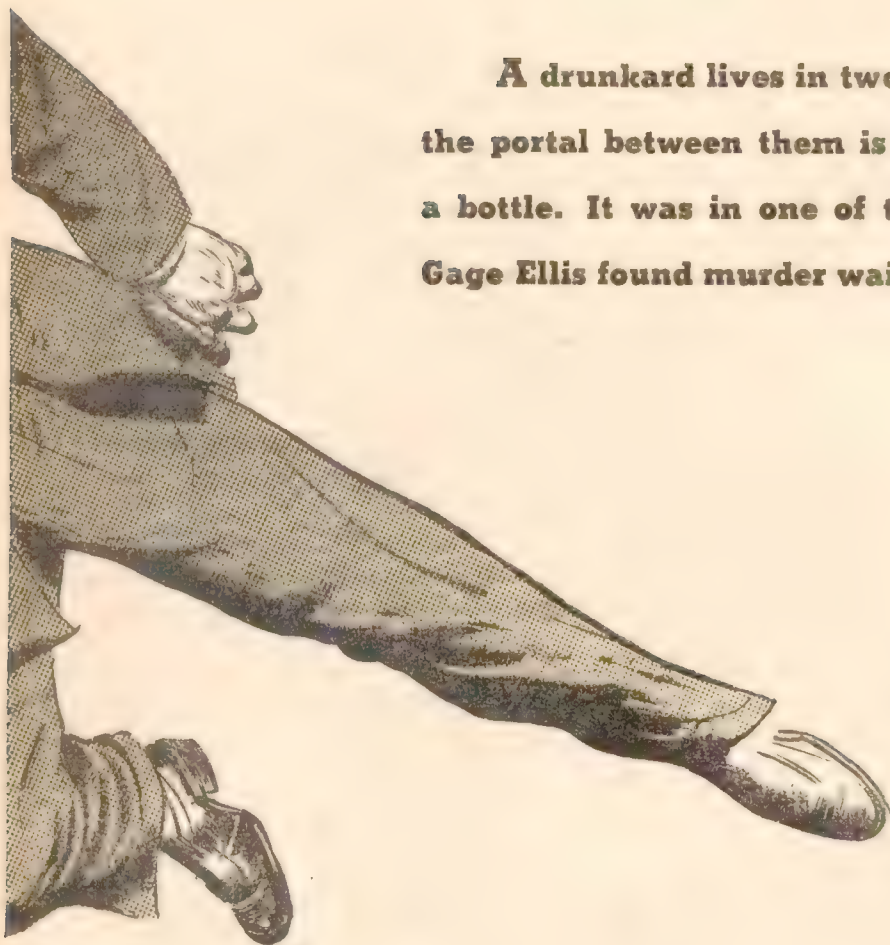


As the two bodies met with a savage impact, the gun fell from Deaton's fingers and he went over backwards

To Die Dreaming

by John H. Knox

A drunkard lives in two worlds and the portal between them is the neck of a bottle. It was in one of those worlds Gage Ellis found murder waiting for him



CHAPTER I

Ellis in Hangover-Land

GAGE ELLIS was getting drunk again. He knew it by the old familiar signs. Things were beginning to get good. Everything. The littered room with its empty bottles and

piled ash trays, the thin sunlight shafting through beige curtains to the green carpet. All this, which had been a horror to him on awakening, was now, if not positively attractive, at least toler-

able.

He looked at Dr. Irving Tetlow seated on the divan across the room and smiled. He looked past Tetlow to the curtained door of his studio with its frightening message of work unfinished and neglected. He was able to thumb his nose at that now. Deliberately he leaned back and surrendered to the sheer animal comfort of a soft cushion against his backbone.

"Well, Irv, come to preach my funeral?" he asked.

Dr. Tetlow flushed. He was a spruce young man, with a clean-shaven face, pink, healthy, a trifle severe. After all, Gage considered tolerantly, you couldn't blame Maydell for choosing Tetlow, even though she had accepted his, Gage's, ring, before he had gone overseas. Love could not be bound by such considerations. And he himself had not been blameless—particularly since his heavy drinking had begun.

"I wish you weren't so bitter, Gage," Tetlow said.

"Me bitter? Nonsense!"

Detachedly Gage watched a sunbeam kindle in the whiskey glass on the table. Two inches of gold-brown magic there. The sweetish cloying smell of it was pleasant. And he had but to move his hand three inches to take it. And the hand was steady now. He felt that he could take a brush again and perform miracles. Only he no longer cared so much about miracles. It was enough just to feel that he could do it if he wanted to.

He raised the glass and drained it. He saw the tightening of Tetlow's lips, stared back at him, making a sound of satisfaction with his tongue against his teeth. "Don't say it," he told the doctor, "not a word. Just mind your own business, you meddling sawbones."

Tetlow shrugged. "I didn't come here to preach, Gage. Maydell wanted you

to help us find Joyce. She's vanished. Been gone since Wednesday night."

Gage straightened. "What's today?" "Friday."

Gage passed a hand across his forehead and right cheek.

"I really had a load on, I guess. And my trouble is that I pass out and keep going. As for Maydell's hell-raising little sister Joyce, she beats me burning the candle at both ends."

TETLOW looked at his well manicured fingers. "Well, Joyce has some excuse. With a congenitally defective heart getting worse fast, she's living on borrowed time anyhow. But you had a future as an artist. And even if you've got a right to bitter about my winning Maydell while you were off fighting, still, it's no excuse for going into a suicidal decline."

"You go to hell," Gage said, but he grinned. "So what's Joyce gone and done this time?"

"God knows," Tetlow said. "I saw her early Wednesday evening. She was already drinking heavily and I warned her about her heart. But I couldn't stay to look after her because I had to catch the midnight plane for Dallas to read a paper at a Medical Convention. I just got back this morning and heard what Joyce did later."

"What?"

"According to her maid, Mamie Taylor, the only one to see her, Joyce came in after midnight, alone and drunk. She went to the attic, got her dead mother's bridal dress out of an old trunk, put it on and left in a taxi, saying she was going to get married."

"The devil! Still, she's said that before."

"But that was Wednesday night, and she hasn't come back, and none of her friends have seen her. The only clue Maydell has is a photograph which

came through the mail this morning—evidently sent by Joyce herself. It shows her in the bridal dress and has a scrawl on the back in her handwriting asking Maydell not to try to find her. Which of course is what Maydell is trying to do. She's over in Rio Bravo now, making a canvass of the photographers' shops. And since you know that Mexican town a lot better than we do, we thought you might be able to help."

"Maydell hasn't gone to the police?"

Tetlow shook his head. "Maydell hates to advertise Joyce's binges." He stood up. "Well, I'm due at the hospital in thirty minutes."

Gage went with him to the door. But as Tetlow started down the hall, Gage called to him, "Oh, by the way, Irv, have you ever read Freud on dreams?"

Tetlow turned with a quizzical smile. "Well, I'm a doctor. Are you thinking of getting yourself psycho-analyzed?"

"No . . . Yeah. Talk to you later."

Gage closed the door and stood frowning. Away back in his buried memories a foggy apprehension stirred. It was what had prompted the impulsive question—one of those sudden, inexplicable pangs of alarm that rise in a drunkard's brain to stab him like a dagger in a disembodied hand. But Tetlow's amused smile had caused him to drop it. Now he turned briskly to the business of getting dressed.

But the feeling persisted. Tubbed, shaved, and in a fresh suit, Gage downed another drink and butted his way into the big dim studio. There, amidst stale odors of turpentine and linseed oil, he paused before a full-length portrait of Joyce Henson, standing unfinished on an easel.

Intently he studied the slender figure, the elfin face with its golden curls, emerging ghostlike from an ectoplasm of painted shadows. "Hello, Cynara," he greeted, "we never did quite get that

smile right, did we?"

He shook his head at the memory of those futile efforts to capture the elusive, tragic essence of Joyce herself—the poetry of a flower doomed in its first bright blossoming. Not that he and Joyce had ever talked in that high-flown way. But between Gage Ellis and the sister of the girl he loved there had always been a queer unspoken bond, all the deeper perhaps because there had been no sex in it.

"Butch, you little beast," Gage said aloud, "what in hell have you gone and done? Got drunk and married some stinker?"

The portrait did not answer, but a sudden troubling fragrance impinged upon his thoughts, caused him to stoop and pick up a small lace handkerchief with "Joyce" embroidered in one corner.

Her handkerchief, dropped there at her last sitting, he recalled. He held it under his nose and began to whistle "Morer Senando," that dreamy Mexican tune, whose very melody expresses its haunting title, "To Die Dreaming."

Their song—his and Joyce's. And she had called that perfume "Morer Senando" too—a nameless essence picked up in an obscure shop in Mexico City, and which Joyce always wore when she sat for him. But as he sniffed the odor now something like terror stabbed at Gage again, a terror not so much of the unknown as of the half-remembered. Frowning, he thrust the handkerchief into his pocket and walked out.

In the living room he paused, breathing hard, his eyes downcast and turned inward. That odor! It too evoked the ghost from that dark confusion of reality and nightmare which stretched for thirty-six muddled hours behind him. Definitely it was tied up with some memory of Joyce, or some dream of her. But what, how, when, where, he could

not say.

Gage looked down at his hands, at the beads of sweat gleaming among the dark hairs on the backs of the powerful fingers. The fingers shook. "I must stay sober and help Maydell," Gage grated.

He poured a double-shot of whiskey, hesitated, downed it, and headed for Rio Bravo across the river.

TWO hours later the old fashioned bar in *Los Puertes Celestiales* was just beginning to get the afternoon trade. The old guard had begun to trickle in earlier and now there was the usual scattering of tourists who had managed to wander past the brass and tinsel of the showy places on the Avenida Carranza. Gage drank a double scotch, chatted a few moments with Tom McGonigal, the bartender, and then, with a bottle and a glass, made for the shadowy ballroom where the orchestra was tuning up for a rehearsal.

He slid behind a table just inside the curtained door and sat in the darkness savoring a sense of cool and godlike anonymity as he watched the orchestra in its little island of light.

He had made a round of all the *Fotografias* in Rio Bravo, beginning with the studio of his temperamental friend, Jose Morales, but had failed to find Maydell, who had been hours ahead of him. As for Joyce, no one remembered any blonde American girl who had had a bridal picture made within the past few days. Now, fortified by his drinks, Gage was beginning to view the matter as just another of Joyce's escapades. He had managed to push aside even the gnawing sense of fear which had arisen earlier from the blackout of his binge to plague him.

"I have forgotten much, Cynara, gone with the wind—"

The orchestra, as if intent on startling

him, went suddenly into a rhumba, and with a rattling of castanets, Carmen Delgao, the dancing star, came out to rehearse a routine. Gage relaxed, surrendered to the mood.

But all too soon it was over. Then, on the sudden silence, a voice like the gentle grating of sandpaper, came through the parted curtain from the direction of the bar.

"If anybody could find Joyce," the voice said, "Gage Ellis should be able to. But I suppose he's still drunk. Some day, on one of his binges, he'll do something he won't be able to sleep off."

Gage turned and peered through the velvet slot. Maydell Henson sat on a bar stool beside Basil Deaton, the Henson family lawyer. Maydell was in a cool blue linen suit, and pure clean lines of her profile in striking contrast to the long-jawed young lawyer's. The latter always cultivated a look of pious seediness. Maydell was drinking a whiskey sour, but Deaton drank only plain soda.

Gage parted the curtains, and looking deliberately past Deaton, called, "Maydell."

The girl gave a start; Deaton scowled. Turning quickly to Maydell, he said, "I've got a clue of my own to follow. See you later."

Maydell nodded as he left and then when over and joined Gage. He held a chair for her and she sat down and said nothing at all—which was volumes.

"Don't give me the evil eye," he said. "I've spent two hours hunting you through the *Fotografias*. No luck?"

"No luck. You're getting drunk again."

"Again?" Gage laughed. "If you were anybody but you, I'd bite your head off for that." He watched her face, thrown into sharp relief by the light from the pit and wondered why he loved her so much.

She wasn't half so exotically alluring

as Joyce. But there was a quiet beauty in her clear eyes, her braided hair, her luminous clean skin, that to Gage was irresistible.

He said, "Look, Dell, I wouldn't be so upset about Joyce. That little devil knows her way around. Let her have her fun while she can."

"But her heart, Gage—"

"It's a wild bird's heart. Let her fly."

"But suppose she's gone on a bat and married some rotter?"

"Suppose she has—?" he paused, frowning at a sudden thought. "So that's it? You're afraid the incredible Totten has come back?"

She nodded, and between them, as the orchestra breathed, appropriately, a waltz, there arose in the tinted smoke of their cigarettes the tall and stalwart figure of Totten. In his trim chauffeur's uniform, with his square face, low of brow, strong of chin, cool-eyed with the brainless animality so appealing to women in certain moods, there was a definite threat which both of them recognized.

JOYCE at eighteen had been infatuated with this employee of her father's, and with a rich child's contempt for social shibboleths, had insisted that she would marry him. The result, however, inevitable in any instance in which the late, iron-jawed Peter J. Henson was opposed, had been the exit of Totten.

"But no," Gage shook his head, answering himself, "as soon as your father changed his will so that Joyce couldn't get a cent if she married Totten, the princely chauffeur did a fade-out. And that was two years ago." He paused, irritably eyeing the naked ice in the bottom of his glass. "Just how does that will read anyhow?"

"Originally," Maldell said, "the will provided simply for an equal division of

the estate between Joyce and me. I already have mine; Joyce is due to get hers next year when she becomes of age. The only thing unusual about the will was that we do not stand to inherit from each other in case of death. Father considered that a half million dollars was enough for either of us, so he put in a provision that if either of us should die unmarried and childless, that part of the estate would go to establish a Foundation for War Orphans."

"Meanwhile Deaton administers Joyce's share?"

"Yes."

"And Deaton would also administer the Foundation's funds?"

"Yes."

"All right. That was the way the will read originally. But your father changed it to get rid of Totten, didn't he?"

"Not exactly. He simply added a clause stating that if Joyce married before she was twenty-one, the money would all go to me. Father believed that Joyce was certain to forget Totten by that time, if not she could do as she pleased—once she was of age."

"But why leave the money to you if she married before she was of age? I mean, why didn't your father simply let it go to the Foundation in that event, the same as if she died?"

Maydell smiled. "Father wasn't as hard as he was painted. He wanted to give Joyce another chance, even if she should marry Totten. If the money went to the Foundation, that would be irrevocable. So he arranged for it to go to me—with the understanding between us that if Joyce did marry Totten while still a minor, I'd hold the money and give it to her on condition that she got rid of him."

Gage closed his eyes for a moment, let the music and the darkness cradle him. "It seems to me," he said, "that

your Dad put a considerable temptation in Deaton's way. I mean it keeps Deaton hanging uncertainly on the sidelines like a buzzard, waiting for one or both of you to die."

"Oh, but Basil is the soul of honor," Maydell said.

Gage opened his eyes and saw—well, a drink. He took it. "I wonder just what this soul of honor is," he mused. "To a Puritan like Deaton, for instance. To consider a Foundation for War Orphans more important than the life of one solitary and foredoomed prodigal daughter—might that be the soul of honor?"

CHAPTER II

The Cheshire Smile

MAYDELL flushed with annoyance and pushed back her chair. "You're insulting Basil," she said, "because of that remark of his you overheard. Also you're hinting at something rather horrible—"

Gage was immediately contrite. He caught one of Maydell's hands and held it. "I'm sorry, Dell. I just popped off. Really I think Joyce is all right. Tell me all about this fadeout she pulled."

"But I know so little," Maydell said miserably. "Actually I live out there at that Rehabilitation Center at Ft. Marcy, and when Irving Tetlow called me from the airport, just before he left for Dallas Wednesday night, and warned me about Joyce's drinking, I didn't see what I could do about it then, since she wasn't at home. And then next morning, when her maid, Mamie Taylor, told me about the queer way she had acted when she did come home, it was too late."

"You mean about Joyce's dressing in your mother's bridal dress and saying she was going to be married?"

"Yes, and something even crazier. Mamie Taylor says that before Joyce left that night she swept the whole attic floor. And it has been swept. I looked. She must have been out of her mind. Maybe there's some old superstition about getting married and sweeping a room, but if so I never heard of it."

"Nor I," Gage said. "And that's all?"

"All but the photograph which came in this morning's mail."

From her large purse Maydell took a brown envelope and slid it across the table. Gage looked first at the postmark and saw that it had been mailed in Rio Bravo yesterday at 4:00 p.m. He opened the envelope and plucked out a three-by-five photograph.

It had a shiny unretouched look. In the darkness he could not see it clearly, but it seemed to be Joyce all right, seated rather stiffly in a draped chair against a background of dark curtains. She was wearing an old-fashioned bridal dress with the veil drawn back from her face. Her eyes were downcast, staring at her folded hands. She was smiling, rather slyly he thought at first glance. He turned the photograph over. On its back in an unsteady scrawl were the words:

Don't try to find me. Leave me to my brief happiness.

—Joyce

"Her handwriting?"

"Well, of course she was tight, but I think so."

"Then she was evidently still circulating at four yesterday afternoon."

He continued to frown at the writing. Suddenly he was aware of the silence in the dark room. The orchestra had paused to mop their faces and now there came a clack-clack of sharp heels on the dance floor and he looked up to see Car-

men Delgado approaching.

The dancing queen of the Avenida Cinco de Mayo was a tiny thing, with a beauty as brittle and perfect as a dark jade carving. She came with tawny limbs flowing in long deliberate strides, her black eyes brighter than the sequins which flashed on her scanty trunks, on the cape that billowed like dark wings behind her.

Gage stood up and made an exaggerated bow. "*Florecita!*"

"Gagee!" the dancer cried. "*Mi corazon*" She extended her arms and rushed toward Gage as if swooning.

Maydell, startled by the horse play had stood up too. Gage caught the dancer in his arms and made introductions. "My future wife," he finished, indicating Carmen.

MAYDELL gave a start; something like alarm flared briefly in her eyes. But Carmen loosed a ripple of musical laughter, sat down and began to pour herself a drink. "Thees Gage!" she cried. "He ees so fonee! What you call the cut-ooop. Avery week he propose to me. Avery week I accept. Then—how you call eet—he stand me oop!"

"He's a problem child," Maydell laughed, looked at her wrist watch. "But I must go; I'm supposed to meet Irving—" she reached for the photograph.

"No," Gage laid a hand on it. "If you must go, let me keep the photograph. I'll do all I can to find Joyce."

Maydell looked significantly at the bottle on the table.

"Oh, that?" Gage said. "But I'm as sober as a judge. I'm going to stay that way."

Maydell sighed. "Well, if you would—just for once, Gage." She nodded to Carmen with a smile and walked away.

Gage sat down frowning. "She seemed a little skeptical, huh? Well,

she knows me." He poured another drink. "Or does she?" He did not take it. Instead he stared determinedly at the photograph again.

"Good God!"

He got up and carried the glossy print to the light. His eyes focused on Joyce Henson's face and again he swore.

"My fran! What is wrong?" Carmen asked.

"The smile," Gage said. "It's amazing. Why, damn my ears I've been trying to paint Joyce Henson's portrait for a year, trying to get a certain smile. I've had Joyce run through the whole gamut of smiles from Mona Lisa to Gracie Allen. But I never saw a smile like this on her face."

"What is eet like, Gage?"

"Rather like a Cheshire cat," he said slowly. He came back and sat down. Gradually his expression changed from bewilderment to vague alarm. "And not a nice cat," he said. He picked up his drink.

"Wait, *amigo*," Carmen said. "Let the mind work—"

"I don't think it wants to," Gage laughed hollowly. His hand on the whiskey glass trembled slightly as he raised it to his lips.

GRADUALLY, inevitably, as he had known he would, Gage arrived at that stage where he did not count the time in minutes or even in hours, but only in drinks. Inside him a flame burned softly like the glow of sunset through a rose window, and all the chatter and scramble of human animals moving in intimate proximity in the thick-populated darkness, the scuffling of feet, and even the braying of a Latin tenor with a voice as soft as a hot spoiled melon in the Mexican sun was good, was music too. As was the soft thump of his own blood blending with

the throb of plucked strings and muted brasses.

And you knew quite well, he told himself, that you had failed again, had disappointed the only girl you ever loved. Yet here you sit, quite willing to go on living—in the fleshy moment—staring at an animated little idol with jeweled ear-rings across a stretch of white table, smiling, watching her as she goes to dance when her number comes up and then returns to sit with you, to study you with those lovely eyes that, like the eyes of her racial gods, are half reptile and half angel.

"Morer Senando—to die dreaming. Will you have them play it again?"

"But this ees the feefth time, amigo."

"Never mind. Will you?"

"Si. Bot you will dreenc coffee. One cup? No?"

"Me? Coffee? Are you crazy?"

"You. Coffee. I am not crazee . . . Waiter!"

Well, one had to make concessions. Coffee! Ugh! But here goes! And the rank and bitter java flows down your throat, annihilating the delicate flavor of sloe gin and absinthe, as a rattlesnake's venom destroys blood cells. Annihilating too your rosy dreams, bringing back inexorably into focus that film upon the screen of consciousness which had gone haywire and had got so pleasantly—so irresponsibly—jumbled. Gage spoke of it openly, bitterly, cursing the hated caffeine.

"Drink!"

"Am I a dog?"

"You are a fool. Thees girl, thees May-dell Hen-son, she depends upon your help. And she ees grand and fine . . ."

"She wouldn't care if I died in the gutter."

"I am not so sure of that. But nev-aire mind. There ees the leetle Joyce you must theenk of too."

So he had told her? Yes, of course, he remembered now—a long drawn and tragic tale of the lovely elfin Joyce, doomed since childhood by a heart that could not be mended, flinging her roses riotously with the throng, and who could blame her?

Another gulp of this disillusioning mud? Yes, he could manage it. And yes, perhaps he could face it too—the subconscious prompting which was perhaps forcing him to get drunk again at this particular time.

"Look, Carmen," he said abruptly, "I'm afraid to get sober."

"Bot of course," she eyed him steadily. "I know that."

"You are infallible," he said sourly.

HE LOOKED up and saw with utter astonishment that the hands of the clock glowing somewhere high in the velvet shadows were pointing to seven-thirty. Nearly dark! And Carmen had not stayed with him merely to entertain herself. No, he owed her something. He said:

"Something's happened to Joyce. I've felt it from the first, but I fought it off. And something about that photograph is—*wrong*. It's certainly not the smile of a woman who has just married or is about to, eh?"

"No," Carmen said, "no. *Muy triste*, that smile."

"Sad, yes," Gage said, "but that's not quite it either. Nor is it the smile of a drunk, drugged or frightened person. At least I don't think so, and I'm a portrait painter."

Carmen said, "I do not trust thees lawyer, Deaton."

"Ah, Deaton. Well, any man who doesn't drink is a little sinister, isn't he? But it isn't Deaton I'm afraid of. Nor the chauffeur Totten either—though he may possibly have come back."

"Then who?"

Gage leaned across the table and hissed, "Me!"

Carmen gave a start, drew back instinctively, as if he had suddenly shown her bloodstained hands. "Bot Gage—!"

"Wait a minute," he said steadily. "Here's a theory that's been cooking in the back of my mind: Joyce knew she didn't have long to live. Maybe she was fed up with waiting. But if she died unmarried and childless her money would go to Deaton's 'Foundation.' But Joyce has always hated the hypocritical Deaton. On the other hand, if she should marry, that money of hers would go to Maydell, whom she loves —"

"So, so she marries. Bot who?"

"Anybody!" Gage said. "That's the hell of it. She marries the first man who will take her and then goes out and ends it all."

Carmen shivered. "Bot what do you mean when you say that you—"

"I mean," Gage said, "that Joyce may have found me drunk and helpless and may have used me somehow in her wretched scheme."

"Bot why do you theenk that? Do you remember?"

"Only in a jumbled way. But a little of it has come back. A hazy half memory, a hidden fear. The smell of her perfume this morning evoked it—a feeling that I had seen or dreamed of Joyce in that period of drunkenness. But you can't recall these things by an effort of will. A psycho-analyst can dig them out sometimes; otherwise they return only by accidental association."

He paused. Beads of sweat brought out by the coffee gleamed on his brow. He looked longingly at the liquor glass. Carmen nodded and he took a drink. "You see," he went on, "I've been drinking heavily for three days. But yesterday I sobered up, enough to know

what I was doing at least. Then last night I was drunk again. I wandered about through the native section and somewhere I met a woman. She was rather light colored for a Mexican, but with lush black hair and a certain staginess about her broken English. She and I roamed around and finally ended up at a wedding party."

"A wedding party! And you did not dream that?"

"Not that part, I'm positive. Also there's an impression that the girl had known me somewhere before but wouldn't admit it. Anyhow the wedding party was a rowdy affair and I drank more, and was amusing and very *sympatico*, and a perfect ass no doubt. I signed a bride's book or something of the sort; I think I even sang. And then —blotto!"

"You do not usually go out weeth a sudden bang," Carmen said. "Did you smoke—perhaps *la marihuana*?"

Gage shook his head. "I could never go that stuff, drunk or sober. But there may have been laudanum mixed with the liquor. All I know is that after passing out I woke up, or dreamed I woke up, in a bedroom of the house where the party was still going on. And I opened my eyes dazedly and sniffed and smelt—Morer Senando."

"Smelt? Smelt a song?"

"No, no. A perfume. That perfume of Joyce's which I told you she called by the song's name. And there was door open a crack into another room and a girl was standing before a mirror. I couldn't see her face—only her clothes and her long yellow hair. Both certainly looked like Joyce Henson's. So I yelled, 'Butch! You little tramp! It's Morer Senando!'"

THE girl seemed to stiffen, but did not turn. The little three-piece string orchestra in the other room was

playing a muted melody, and after a moment the girl spoke. Her voice reached me distorted, as if she had a mouth full of hairpins.

"'Morer Senando?' " she asked. "Don't be silly. It's *Little Hat*."

"She was referring to the music, of course?" Carmen asked.

"Of course. But I was referring to the perfume. And that was strange, so strange that I still think I may have dreamed it. For if the girl had been Joyce—Joyce in her right mind, at least—she would certainly have known it was the perfume I meant and not the song.

"Anyhow I jumped off the bed and made for the door. But the girl slammed and locked it. Then I found a bottle and drank some more and went to sleep, and when my dark haired friend came in again I asked her about the blonde. But she laughed at me and said there was no blonde at the party and that I had dreamed it."

"And still you are not sure?"

"Yes, that's the hell of it. For if the yellow haired girl was a dream, that ends it. But if she was real, then either she was Joyce and was deliberately evading me, or she was not Joyce at all, but someone impersonating her. Either alternative looks bad. And what did I do in the blacked-out hours that followed? A psycho-analyst might bring those blotted memories back, but that takes time. Did you ever read Freud, Carmen?"

"Floyd?"

"Freud, the dream man."

"Dream men I know, bot not thees Floyd."

"Never mind then."

Gage poured another drink, lighted a cigarette. Couples were leaving their tables for the dance floor. The orchestra went into a fox trot. Then, on the dimlit floor Gage saw two couples mov-

ing—Dr. Irving Tetlow dancing with Maydell, and the lowyer, Deaton, dancing with a slim girl with tight reddish curls, whom at first Gage did not recognize but whom he finally placed as Joyce's maid, Mamie Taylor.

"When did they come in?" Gage asked.

"An hour or so ago," Carmen said. "They passed you bot they did not speak."

Gage nodded sombrely. "Maydell knows I've been right here slopping up liquor all the time."

He waited until the dance ended, then excused himself to Carmen and started for the other table. The polished floor lurched at him in a gentle friendly way, but he steadied himself and made it.

"Have you learned anything?" he asked the group.

STONY stares met his question. Maydell's face alone held pain rather than hostility. She started to answer but Deaton interrupted curtly. "Suppose you answer a few questions. Where were you last night?"

Gage bit his lip and fought back his anger for Maydell's sake.

"Where were you?" he countered, smiling tightly. And when Deaton did not answer, he turned and walked away.

He sat down at his own table again and downed a stiff drink.

"You must sober up, amigo," Carmen said sternly.

Gage shook his head. "No, I must get drunk."

Carmen's eyes flashed. "Then I shall leave you!"

"You too?" Gage caught her hand. "No, *Florencia*, I need you. What I mean is this: sober, I could never have recalled as much as I told you. Your drunkard lives in two worlds. The

portal between them is the neck of a bottle. You see? I simply must find that house where I saw the girl I thought was Joyce. The key to the mystery must be there. But I do not even know in what direction to look. So I must go back to that other world where the memory is hidden—in other words, get drunk again."

Carmen laid a hand on his. "I am afraid for you, Gage. Do you have a gun?"

"I'd be afraid to carry one," Gage told her.

The corners of Carmen's mouth tightened. "Then remember, *amigo*, the telephone in my dressing room ees Madero-5936. Eef you are een trouble, call—anywhere, any time, I weel come."

Gage smiled and Carmen made an angry little dab at the tears that had come into her black eyes. Then, to cover her embarrassment, he became boisterous. "*Florencia*, we will be married in *la mañana*!"

She laughed. "Weethout fail?"

"Without fail! You will telegraph *el presidente* to come?" He stood up, holding her hand with a formal half bow. "*Ya no veremos*," he said, "until we meet again."

Carmen was holding a wadded handkerchief in one little fist.

"Go with God."

CHAPTER III

Through The Bottle's Neck

"MADERO," Gage muttered to himself as he moved toward the bar. "I can remember the little martyred president's name all right. Now five—*Cinco de Mayo* will fix that. Nine—three-six. Well, nine, then its square root, then double that. Madero-5936. I won't forget."

He was rather proud of these little tricks. He reached the bar without accident and ordered an absinthe. Pouring it with a frown, Tim McGonigal asked, "What flowers shall I send for your funeral, Gage? Four Roses!"

"I shall be cremated, and my ashes—"

"There won't be any," Tim said. "You'll go up in steam."

Gage drank in silence. The recent snub rankled with a dull pain. Moreover his buried fears for Joyce were gnawing again like rats at the barriers he had erected.

Well, there was one thing he must do before the curtain, already shimmering before his eyes, came down. He must get an enlargement of the photograph of Joyce. Though he felt certain that it was she, the queer smile troubled him, fascinated and repelled him, taunted him as if with some elusive message.

He took a taxi at the curb and was presently deposited at the studio of Jose Morales, artist-photographer.

"Hola, Rivera," he greeted the pot-bellied little *artiste* who came toward him carrying two wet prints. "I want an enlargement of this photograph. I want it so artistically done that one can read the thoughts behind the smile."

"I am only a photographer," Jose reproved. He wiped his hands, adjusted his spectacles and studied the photograph. "Smile?" he asked. "You mean thees grin?"

"Well, grin," Gage said. "But what sort of grin is it? Drunk, scared, malicious, abandoned, resigned, taunting—or what?"

Jose shook his head. "None of those—quite. Only I do not like it. But *bueno*, I will have it for you in *la mañana*."

"*No mañana! At once, pronto! Por favor*," he added.

Morales shrugged. "Well, for a

friend."

"*Gracias*. I will call for it later tonight." Gage started out, paused. "By the way, Jose, did you ever read Freud, the psycho-analyst?"

Jose frowned. "I theenk he ees a Trotskeyite, no?"

"No," Gage said. He left.

A layer of tequila, he decided, laid upon a substantial foundation of Scotch, sloe gin and absinthe, should make an excellent internal combustive, if you have the cylinders to take it. He took on some tequila at a corner saloon modestly styling itself "The Road to Ruin." He licked a little salt from his wrist in deference to his fellow travelers and considered: "Little man, where now?"

He got no immediate promptings from his subconscious—at least none that he recognized as such. But a yen manifested itself to visit the old plaza and the cathedral, so he headed straight for there.

He found himself still able to walk, propelled by the drunkard's second wind. So he absorbed a little *sotol* here and a little *mescal* there, and tackled a few dark streets experimentally. •

These streets, having a flavor all their own, ran in black tunnels from the jeweled hub of the cabaret section, shallow mud-colored tunnels mostly, between the continuous rabbit warrens of the poor, places with an unearthly aspect under a washed-out moon. But unexpectedly more prosperous sections emerged, neat stucco houses springing up almost flush with the street, but remote with that air of walled-in mystery with Spanish homes and seraglios seem to share.

As he walked, Gage's mind drifted far from his problem into such idle speculations, and then suddenly—because he was not trying to—he remembered!

IT HAD been a house with a half-circular window. A house with a narrow yard, with cactus and agave plants whose hard and artificial blooms were like carved carnelian, a product of the lapidary rather than of nature. And because Gage was an artist that was the way he remembered things. So he moved with a desultory slyness, not hunting details, but simply impressions, the surface of his mind a passive and sensitive plate.

The only trouble was that there were no more saloons.

Gage became discouraged. He went on, went back and around. He lost all sense of direction. He began to try to retrace his steps, deferring his original plan in the pressing need for another drink. And again—because he had not willed it—his subconscious memories paid off. He found it—the house!

Yes, this was it. Details he might have forgotten, but seeing it now he *knew*. Yet the house was utterly dark, and he began to wish that he had brought a gun. He began to feel reluctant to go further, almost as if he were afraid of finding Joyce's dead body in the darkness inside.

But that was silly, or at least uncalled for. He went up to the front door and knocked boldly. No reply, no sound. He had already noticed that the big half-circular window had an uncurtained bleakness which threw back the moon waves in a flat wash of silver. Now he peered in and saw that the place was empty, unfurnished.

His head wasn't clear, but he had sense enough to distrust the look of that. He tried the door but it was locked. Well, better go back—

But he was shaky; the need for another drink was tormenting him. And then a sudden deciding factor entered. Another tiny island emerged from the buried archipelago of his memory—the

hiding of a bottle. At some time or other, while he lay in that bedroom, he had awakened with the drunk's familiar fear for his liquor supply. With shaky fingers, he recalled, he had seized his bottle, had taken a pull at it and had wrapped it in a paper of some sort from his pocket and thrust it—where? Ah, into the flue of the unused fireplace in the room!

Neither the fear of what he might find nor of a Mexican jail deterred Gage any longer. But the front door was a formidable affair of axe-hewn cedar, so he went around to the back. And the back door was unlocked. He had but to open it and walk in. It was no more complicated than that.

Why was it unlocked? He opened it cautiously; it screamed a little at the hinges, setting his already jangled nerves on edge. But in the denuded kitchen a lingering odor of dishwater relieved the ghostly aspect of the moon shining on bare sink and drainboard, so he entered and proceeded through a hall and into a living room.

All was familiar again. He had recrossed the threshold of darkness. Certainly the house and the wedding party had been no dream. But he had encountered nothing. Breathing easier, he went on into a bedroom, and yes, it was the very one!

Yet again he stopped. The room was utterly empty. But it had a closet. The door was slightly ajar—there was enough moonlight to see that—and had that door moved slightly, or had he imagined it?

"Rats!" Gage said aloud. He had reached that point in the process of sobering when things have a tendency to flicker and shift. He moved on toward the brick fireplace, thrust his hands in and up, and there it was—the bottle—wrapped in some paper that crackled at his touch.

HE SLUMPED down then, pawed the paper away and drank greedily. Almost instantly he relaxed, in a world magically better. He looked at the closet door. The hair on his scalp began to creep—not because of anything he saw now, but because of something he smelt—a faint but insistent odor, vaguely like magnolia blossoms, the perfume "Morer Senando."

But the odor did not come from the closet. Rather it seemed to emanate from the thick paper in which the bottle had been wrapped. Gage made a grab for the white wrinkled mass, but his hand froze in mid-air. Definitely the door of the closet was opening now.

He waited, not breathing, for what was emerging from that widening stripe of blackness. And when a splinter of faint light gleamed on a gun barrel, there was, for all his tensing nerves, a stupid sense of relief. And as a tall figure began to move toward him into the moonlight, Gage's breath came from his lungs in a rush.

"Well, for God's sake, Deaton," he gasped, "do you have to play Indian at a time like this?"

An instant later his own cry echoed in his ears with an incredibly foolish sound as he saw that the thing which gave the gun in Basil Deaton's hand a queer look was that a .22 marksman's revolver had been distorted by the shape of a silencer attached to its barrel. And Deaton held it levelled, his gaze slit-eyed.

"I thought when you left the night club that maybe you were heading here," the lawyer said softly. "Then, after the news broke it seemed a good idea just to come here and wait for you."

"News? What news, Deaton?"

"Why that they've found Joyce," the lawyer said coldly, "dead. Out in the shallow marshes of the Rio Grande near

the railroad bridge. The reeds and cat-tails had hidden her body. She seemed to have been dead for at least eighteen hours, they say. Beyond that they can't be sure, on account of the heat and the water and all—"

Sick vertigo struck Gage like a blow in the belly. "Murdered, you mean?" he forced the words out.

Deaton shrugged. "They don't know yet. They're looking for poison. There were no marks of violence on her, that is, aside from the fact that the fish and turtles have eaten away the soft parts of her face. But maybe you can throw some light on the mystery."

The blunt and grisly details of Joyce lying dead there in the marshes stunned Gage so completely that at first he did not fully grasp the meaning of the lawyer's last words. And mingled with his grief and horror was the certainty that somehow, in the depths of his being, he had *known*. He looked up then and the expression on Deaton's lean face etched in cruel severity by the moonlight, caused him to ask, "But you—how did you find this place? Do the police—?"

"The police haven't found it yet," Deaton said. "But I sensed something ugly about this business from the start. So I began to investigate all marriage licenses issued here and in neighboring Mexican towns. And I found it—a license taken out by Joyce herself."

"And the man?" Gage interrupted. "Was it Totten?"

DEATON ignored the question, went on. "Next I got hold of the magistrate who had performed the ceremony last night. He admitted being a little tight at the time, but he remembered this place. A visit to the rental agents revealed that Joyce had rented the place only yesterday morning, paying a month's rent in advance."

"Joyce herself? You're sure?"

"The agents described her exactly. So did the magistrate. And she signed the papers, as well as the license."

"Then I was right," Gage grated.

"Right?"

"Certainly. Don't you see what happened? Joyce knew she was going to die. She didn't want to die unmarried; she didn't want you to get that money for the 'Foundation?' So she simply picked up some man and married him—so that Maydell would get it. Then, well, she may simply have gone out and killed herself."

"That's your story?" Deaton asked quietly.

"My story? What do you mean?"

"I mean," Deaton said, "that you're the man who married her. If I'm not badly mistaken that paper lying there by the bottle is a marriage license. Take a look at it—"

CHAPTER IV

Reluctant Bridegroom

LIKE a man in a dream, Gage reached for the crumpled paper in which the bottle had been wrapped. In his eagerness to get a drink he had tossed it carelessly aside. Now, as he snapped it taut between his fists, a gold seal flashed, and moonbeams gleaming whitely on the ornate Spanish printing revealed the truth of Deaton's guess. From a blank space between the printing the name, "Joyce Meredith Henson" leaped out at him. And the other—! Gage felt the room reel as if the agglomeration of liquor in his belly had at last taken its revenge. Scrawled though it was, it was as familiarly his own as his face in the mirror—his own signature!

He knew at once that the "bride's book" he had signed at the wedding party was the answer to this incriminating deception. And its sudden disclosure

necessitated a complete revision of his theory too.

"They tricked me into this," he said. "But I can't believe Joyce would have done so—certainly not if she intended to commit suicide afterward. Joyce was too decent to put me on that sort of spot."

"Of course," Deaton agreed. "No use trying to lay it on her. I guessed at the start that either you or Tetlow was behind it—"

"Tetlow?"

"Why not? I wouldn't put it past him to frame some dirty deal to get Joyce married. He's marrying Maydell; whatever she gains is his. Only it happens that Tetlow couldn't have done this. I went into his alibi rather thoroughly. Definitely he is out. He left on that plane at midnight Wednesday as he said, and I had his movements traced in Dallas. He was there all the time until he got back this morning. Joyce's maid, Mamie Taylor, saw her after Tetlow left, and all the rest of it took place while he was in Dallas. And he couldn't have killed Joyce after he got back because the police say she'd been dead at least eighteen hours when she was found."

"And you think I married her for her money? But why? I couldn't have got the money by marrying her. It would go to Maydell."

"If Joyce had married you," Deaton said slyly, "Maydell would have given the money back to her."

"And you think I did that—and then murdered her?"

"Maybe you didn't intend—that," Deaton said. "But you were drunk, Gage. Be honest and tell me if you yourself can swear to what you did last night."

Gage winced. With cruel accuracy Deaton had hit his vulnerable spot. He tried to answer but the words would not

come. Blindly, instinctively, he reached for the bottle on the floor and pulled the cork with shaking fingers.

The liquor fumes rose to his head like incense. Splinters of white light were stabbing through his skull now; the whole armor of his drunkenness fell away to leave him naked and quivering under Deaton's cold stare.

"Well, go on," Deaton said. "Get a little bottle courage."

Gage's fingers tightened on the bottle that was already half way to his lips. With an oath he hurled it into the fireplace where it crashed against the bricks and filled the close darkness with its heady delirium. Gage stood up on watery knees.

"Thanks, Deaton," he said, between teeth that wanted to chatter. "That did it. Now listen to me. If I killed Joyce I want to know it. I wouldn't want to live if such a thing had happened. But one thing I do know: I never had any intention or any scheme to marry Joyce. If it happened, I was tricked into it while I was blind drunk. But I don't believe I did even that."

"Why not?"

"Did you ever read Freud?" Gage asked.

"Extensively," Deaton said smugly. "You needn't look surprised. The first two years I practiced law I did nothing but read, since I had no clients. But what's Freud got to do with Joyce Henson's murder?"

"Maybe a lot. I've read Freud, too, though I've forgotten most of it. But Freud said something about the source of the material of dreams that should clear up a point for me. First, let me tell you what I can remember about last night—"

BRIEFLY he sketched his memory of the drunken wedding party, dwelling particularly on the blonde girl he

had seen or dreamed he had seen. "That girl, with hair like Joyce's and wearing Joyce's clothes," he said, "was either Joyce or someone impersonating her—or, she was a dream."

"Well?"

"Well, that gets us to Freud. Doesn't Freud say that the material of dreams must come from the events or thoughts of the preceding day, from things that have not been 'slept on,' as he puts it?"

"That's right, as far as it goes." Deaton nodded. "Freud goes into detail on that point. A dream is like a cartoon, you know—it carries a hidden message. This message, or meaning, may refer to anything in the whole range of your life. But the actual stuff of the dream, the figures that appear in it, are always chosen from things that have happened, or things that have been thought of, during the preceding day—the 'dream-day,' as Freud calls it."

"Then," Gage said, "the girl who looked like Joyce couldn't have been a dream. I'm positive of that. Because yesterday I sobered up—though I was tight again last night—and yesterday, I am certain, I never saw Joyce or thought of her at all. I am doubly sure because she had an appointment to sit for me yesterday. If I had remembered it, drunk or sober, I would have been there. But I didn't; Joyce was completely out of my mind. So the girl I saw either was Joyce or she was impersonating Joyce."

"She was Joyce, of course."

Gage shook his head. "She wasn't. Because when I said 'Morer Senando' to her she thought I was talking about the music which was being played. Joyce would have known instantly that I was referring to her perfume—that being the name we used for it between us. And even if she had been deliberately trying to fool me, she'd never have thought quickly enough to evade the pitfall of

that question. So the girl was someone impersonating Joyce. And that means that Joyce was murdered as the result of a deliberately worked out plot."

Deaton shrugged. "I've got only your word for all this. I don't think you killed Joyce, but I do think you planned to marry her and get her money—by talking Maydell into letting you have it. But your crazy drinking was your undoing. Somehow, you killed her."

Gage looked from Deaton's leering face to the levelled gun in his hand. Deaton, he knew now was not interested in discovering the truth so much as in keeping his hold on the money. "Look, Deaton," he said, "if Joyce married me or anyone else before she died, you'll lose control of that money. So it's to your interest to prove that she didn't marry me."

"I mean to prove she didn't marry you—legally," Deaton said. "I mean to prove she was either drugged or under pressure."

"Wouldn't it be better to prove she didn't marry at all? Anybody with a wig and Joyce's clothes could have impersonated her at the license bureau, the rental agency, at the wedding itself. Work with me and we'll prove it—"

"My way is simpler," Deaton said tightly.

GAGE knew then what the lawyer meant. Deaton had no intention of letting him get out of this house alive. Deaton would kill him here on the spot. Then the evidence presented to the police would make a clear and consistent picture: Gage had married Joyce, had murdered her in a drunken fit. Deaton had been forced to shoot him in trying to capture him. The marriage would be declared illegal and Joyce's money would be put immediately and permanently in Deaton's hands for the administration of the Foundation for

War Orphans.

Gage knew that he had to act at once or not at all. With shaking hands and quavering voice he simulated a nervous collapse. "My God, Deaton, give me a chance, let me—"

Then, before Deaton could frame a reply, he sprang.

He threw his whole weight like a battering ram against the tall man's knees. He heard the silenced gun spit like a cat in the darkness, felt the sting of hot lead grazing his neck. Then his arms were clamped round Deaton's legs while his rush bore the lawyer backward toward the window.

Deaton's shoulders struck the pane; Gage gave him a savage butt in the belly. The pane shattered and Gage drew back and kicked with all his might. Deaton went through the window backwards; he landed on the hard earth outside and lay still.

Gage picked up the license and the silenced gun and thrust them into his pockets. Then he climbed through the window, paused long enough beside Deaton to see that the lawyer, though bleeding from a few small cuts, was breathing evenly, and headed for the alley. Guided by a faint glow in the sky, he headed in a lope for the heart of town, his heart hammering as the alcohol drained from his system.

Presently he reached a saloon with a telephone. Gritting his teeth against the temptation to stop at the bar, he went on into the booth and called Carmen's number. She answered almost at once, and the breathlessness of her voice was a warning, even before she whispered:

"Shhh! The police! They are hunting for you—"

"I know," Gage grated. "But before they get me I've got to have a look at that Henson house in Del Norte."

"For what?" Carmen asked.

"To find out why Joyce swept the attic," Gage said.

"It is a beeg reesk," Carmen warned. "They found her body on the American side of the reever. You are safer here—in Mexico."

"I'd not safe anywhere until I find Joyce's killer," Gage told her. "You've got to help me get across the river, Carmen. Can you meet me here in a taxi, right away?"

Carmen said she could. Gage gave her the name of the saloon and the street and hung up. He walked to the bar. His whole system shrieked for liquor, but he forced himself to stop with one bottle of beer. Then he went outside and stood in the shadowed space between the saloon and the next building and kept his hat pulled low over his eyes.

In less than twenty minutes a taxi approached. A small face, shadowed by a high Spanish comb, peered anxiously out from the back seat. Gage stepped out, and as the taxi slowed, he dashed for it. Clipping in, he looked at Carmen with a gasp of astonishment.

"Where's the opera?"

Carmen laughed, shrugged tiny shoulders under the gay mantilla that covered them. She was dressed as a Senorita of old Spain—like the heroine of the opera that bore her name. Also, Gage noticed, as the cab moved on, there was a pile of clothing beside her which included satin breeches, and embroidered vest and silk hose.

"You like?" Carmen asked. "Well, you want to cross the reever. So eet ees to a masquerade party we weel be going."

"But I'll need papers, a passport all the same."

"Si, I have them," she smiled like a witch, thrust a flat wallet toward him. "They belong to my partner—Geronimo Luz. He ees about your size. Een the

toreador costume and weeth a leetle grease paint, you weel get by."

Gage chuckled. "Bravo!" The cab was approaching the business district now. Gage ordered the driver to pull into the alley behind the *Fotografia* of Jose Morales. "I want to pick up that enlarged photograph of Joyce," he explained to Carmen, "and while I am in there I will slip into the toreador costume."

WHILE the cab waited with lights off and motor idling, Gage roused Jose from his quarters behind the shop. The tubby photographer was frightened. The police had been there, had taken the original photograph, and even now were watching the place for Gage's return. But Jose had hidden the enlargement. While he went to get it, Gage stripped to his underwear, got into the toreador's costume, and was smearing brown greasepaint on his face when Jose returned.

"How do I look, Jose?"

"One would not know you if one did not smell the breath." He handed Gage the rolled up enlargement and made a grab for his clothes to hide. "*Andale, andale*, you must hurry. The police—"

The front doorbell shrilled with a preemptory, official insistence. Gage sprang through the door. He dived into the taxi and they were off. As they swung into the street a police whistle trilled from the shadowy alley behind them.

"You weel be droonk," Carmen told Gage as the taxi headed for the international bridge, "that ees a role you do not have to rehearse. Me, I weel show the passport and keed the guards—"

She had both the wit and the looks for that. Gage, lolling with mouth agape in one corner, passed easily for her drunken dancing partner, and a few moments later the cab was speeding

through the dark industrial section of Del Norte.

As they headed for the residential section of the American town, Carmen was nervous and full of doubts. Gage had told her of his encounter with Deaton, and she had heard the broadcast of the police manhunt for Gage. "You have been framed, *amigo*," she said fearfully. "And now, to go to thees house, you are steeking your head into the lion's jaws."

Gage admitted the truth of that. But he was determined not to turn back until Joyce's killer had been tracked down. The taxi had reached a section of palatial old-fashioned mansions set on high terraces, and at Gage's direction, it dropped them in the alley behind a big brownstone set among palms and oleanders. They got out then and stood in the shadows in their fantastic garb and looked at the back of the dark Henson house.

They had observed no signs of the police around. Since Joyce's body had not been found here, it seemed that the police had simply searched the place and left. Also, Joyce's maid, Mamie Taylor, was the only servant who slept at the house, and she was probably still out with Maydell and Tetlow.

They let themselves into the back yard and Gage jimmied the door of the back porch with a wire. He forced a kitchen window and admitted Carmen to the hall and from there they stole up to the second floor and went on by narrow winding stairs into the attic.

A musty smell of dust, cobwebs and old furniture greeted them as they opened the attic door and stared into the dim raftered space, lit faintly by moonlight entering a single window at the front. Gage found an old chest nearby and, fumbling among masses of mouldy cloth, dragged out an armful of old draperies and blanketed the window

until no light from within could show. Then he snapped on the bulb in the center of the barnlike room.

The clean-swept floor stood out at once in contrast to the dust and spider webs that covered the old trunks and furniture stored under the angles of the sloping roof.

"Wal, my fran," said Carmen, who had closed the door and lighted a cigarette. "Here ees your attic; here ees your clean-swept floor. Now what are you going to do weeth eet?"

"Save myself from the hot squat—I hope," Gage told her.

CHAPTER V

The Girl and the Ghost

HE LIT a cigarette too, then walked over to a circular table which bore an even and undisturbed film of dust and stood staring down at it. "There were three questions to begin with," he said after a moment. With his fingers he began to write, as on a blackboard:

"1. Was the girl I saw in the house in Rio Bravo: Joyce—a dream—or someone posing as Joyce?"

"2. Why was the attic floor swept?"

"3. What is the meaning of Joyce's queer smile in the photo?"

He considered the questions briefly and then, against the first one, he wrote the answer: "Not a dream, but not Joyce."

Carmen gave him a quick look. "You are sure? Why?"

"I have proved to myself that it wasn't a dream," he said. "And if it wasn't a dream, the girl could not have been Joyce because Joyce would have known instantly what I meant by 'Morer Senando'."

"And so?"

"And so, if she wasn't Joyce, she was a deliberate imposter. In which case,

the marriage and all the rest was not Joyce's scheme, but a deliberate plot against her which ended in her death."

Carmen nodded slowly. "And the other questions?"

"Well, as for the attic floor, it must have been swept to hide traces of something. As for the smile in the photograph, well, let's have a look at it again—in the enlargement."

Kneeling down, Gage unrolled the enlargement and spread it upon the clean floor. It was about twelve by twenty inches now, clear and unre-touched, an excellent job. He stared at Joyce's face, the downcast eyes, the eerie enigmatic smile. It was almost a grin, but not quite, the teasing, almost malicious slyness offset by some unearthly quality he could not define.

Instinctively his own eyes followed the eyes of the grinning bride and lingered on the folded hands in her lap. The left hand was in plain sight but there was no wedding band nor even an engagement ring upon it. There was instead, on the ring finger, a black spot which looked like a heavy dinner ring, an inappropriate piece of costume jewelry. Also it appeared to have a design which was neither conventional nor pleasant. What could it be? A black skull, a scarab—?

Shaking his head, Gage raised his eyes to the draperies which formed the picture's background and covered the chair in which the weird bride sat. For the most, it was a mere indistinct darkness, but in one spot where the light struck it, there showed a faint, plume-like pattern of brocade.

GAGE straightened with a little tingling in his blood. He stared at the window over which he had stretched the old drapes from the chest. He came to his feet, and followed by Carmen, carried it over and held it against them.

"Look, these drapes are brocaded too. Now see the spot there on the photograph? Try to match it."

With an excited intake of breath, Carmen began to go over the drapes with her hand. Yes, there it was—a plume-like design, the very same!

"Oh!" Abruptly Carmen drew back with a cry of fright.

Gage looked and laughed. From the fold of the drapery a black spider had crawled out and almost touched the dancer's hand.

"*Diablo!*" she shivered. "I am more afraid of thees black monster than of a gun!"

"Most women are—" Gage stopped. He glanced at the photo again and a thrill of discovery shot through his veins. He released the print and let it roll itself up again. He took Carmen's arm and steered her back to the table on which the questions were written. Against the second question he wrote in the dust:

"Swept because the photograph was made here."

"But Joyce could not have photographed herself," Carmen said.

"Of course not. The floor was swept to destroy the footprints of the person or persons who photographed her."

"Then who—?"

"Well," Gage said, "the maid, Mamie Taylor, who claimed that Joyce was up here alone and swept the floor herself, must have lied. And if she lied—"

He broke off as Carmen clutched his arm. There had come a faint sound of footsteps in the lower part of the house. A door opened and closed.

In three swift strides Gage reached the light and snapped it off. Carmen glided to his side. They tiptoed to the door, opened it and stood listening. A light burned in the lower hall now; a faint ghost of it travelled up past the turn in the boxed stairs to the attic.

A woman's voice reached them, humming a snatch of song as she moved about on the lower floor of the house.

*"Beyond the mountains you will find
Granada,
Land of romance and tender memories—"*

Memories! Gage shuddered. The song was *La Golondrina*; the voice, he felt certain, was that of the maid, Mamie Taylor.

"I want that girl up here," Gage said deep in his throat.

He turned and stared into the darkness. He slipped off his shoes, glided silently to the window and pulled the drapes away. Ghostly moonlight seeped in upon the dimness. Beside the circular table there was a heavy old armchair. Gage moved it to a spot just at the moonlight's edge, began to arrange the drapes over it.

Carmen had followed him. Now he took her arms and pushed her into the chair. He adjusted her body in a stiff, upright position, like the photograph, and folded her hands in her lap. Carmen, with intuitive understanding, submitted silently.

Gage turned. Beyond the moonshaft slanting into the rafters darkness there was an old cabinet phonograph, sagging on its broken leg. Quickly he knelt before it and drew out an armload of old records, a hodge-podge of worn discards, most Spanish. *Morer Senando* was not among them, but *La Golondrina* was. It would do; it was the very song the maid had been humming.

Carefully Gage wound the phonograph, placed the record on the carriage and adjusted the lever to SLOW. He went to the chest and brought an armload of drapes. He closed the sound box doors, started the carriage turning,

placed the needle quickly on the record's edge and closed the lid. Then he wound the drapes around the instrument to further muffle the sound.

A faint and dreamy throb of strings breathed out upon the gloomy air. Gage moved swiftly to the door, opened it halfway and stood behind it. He looked back into the room and his own skin prickled.

CARMEN sat upright, utterly still, her face a pallid blotch above the costume whose long skirt made it vaguely resemble a bridal dress. She was a ghost under the spell of the ghostly music—a ghost of Joyce as the photograph had shown her.

Gage listened at the door crack. The singing downstairs had stopped. Had the maid gone to her room? But no, there was a sudden stir—feet moving swiftly to the foot of the stairs, it seemed, stopping there . . .

"Hello, who's up there?" The sound of Mamie Taylor's voice, the fact that she had called instead of running in alarm, to the telephone indicated that she had enough drinks in her to fortify her curiosity. And yes, now she was coming up.

The steps were deliberate on the first flight of stairs. They faltered at the second-floor landing. "Well, I'll be damned! What the devil—?"

It trailed off a little weakly at the last. The steps came on again, but slower, reached the bottom of the attic stairs, stopped.

"Nuts!" the maid's voice said. "Am I nuts, or what—?"

Not fear yet, just a hint of incipient hysteria behind the baffled question. And the music floated down, slow, faint, tantalizing as the half-heard strains of an elfin choir. The girl was in its grip now. Gage could hear her breathing slow—labored—as the steps came on,

but slower. Then, against the faint light from below, she was visible on the attic landing. Gage watched her coarsely pretty face framed by the short, tight, reddish curls—curls, he reflected, over which a wig could be easily fitted. A dark wig and a little grease paint for his mysterious Mexican friend; and blonde wig and Joyce's clothes—for Joyce!

One of the girl's hands had flown to her mouth in a gesture half frightened, half angry. Determinedly she stepped closer to the door. The panting stopped; she was holding her breath. When she released it, it came with a rush.

"Christ!" she gasped and gave the door a violent shove.

She took two steps into the darkness as if unable to check the effort she had summoned to get that far, as if the music had sucked her in like a draft. Now she stood only inches away from Gage, rigid in a paralysis of unbelief, staring at the thing that sat upright in the chair, ghostly, immobile, with the music weaving a dark enchantment about it.

Then the scream came, a wild unleashing of desperate negation flung against something that was incredible, but was there all the same.

"Go away! God damn you, I didn't kill you! I didn't, I didn't, I didn't—!"

IT WAS the sudden scraping of the phonograph needle as it reached the record's end which put a period to her cry. She whirled then and bolted for the door.

But Gage kicked the door shut and grabbed her. Then Carmen sprang nimbly from her ghostly throne and snapped on the light.

Mamie Taylor fought like a cat, not recognizing Gage at first in the torador's costume and grease paint. When she did recognize him she fought like

ten cats, screaming, "You've got nothing on me!"

"I've got enough," Gage told her. He twisted a scrap of torn tapestry in a tight knot about her wrists, spun her around to face him. "You lied about what Joyce did last night. It was you who swept the attic floor—to hide the fact that you made the photograph, and left your footprints in the dust. And you wouldn't have lied if there hadn't been more to the thing than that."

The girl eyed him defiantly, trying to gauge how much he knew. "So what? She made me take a picture of her. Then she took the film and kodak off with her. It wasn't my fault if later she committed suicide."

"Suicide?"

"Why not? There wasn't a mark of violence on her body. Her face was messed up where the fish and turtles got at her. But that was all. And the only poison they found was digitalis—the medicine she took for her heart."

Gage shook his head. "It won't do, Mamie. Because Joyce never went to Rio Bravo at all. It was *you* who went there, next day. And you wore a yellow wig and Joyce's clothes, and you imitated her signature. And it was you, in a dark wig, who picked me up drunk, led me to the house, and in the role of Joyce went through a farce of marriage while I was out on my feet. But you gave yourself away when I woke up and called out, 'Morer Senando' to you, and you thought I meant the music, instead of the perfume Joyce called by that name. And since you did all that, Mamie, you must have murdered her too—"

"Oh, my God no!" the girl cried, her defenses collapsing in panic. "I didn't. I swear it. Suppose I did fake the marriage? I did it so that Maydell could get the money instead of Deaton. I didn't believe Joyce would ever live

over the drunk she was on. But I had nothing to do with her death . . ." she paused. "Look here, you'd better want them to call it suicide. My admitting that I faked the marriage won't clear you. It's you the police are after now. And they'll be here soon. Sergeant Nickell, of Homicide, is with Maydell and Dr. Tetlow. And they're coming here as soon as they pick up Deaton, who telephoned that he had found you in Rio Bravo . . ."

Even as she spoke there was a sound of feet on the front porch. A door opened voices murmured in the hall.

"Help, help!" Mamie Taylor screamed.

Instinctively Gage's hand flew to the silenced .22 which he had taken from Deaton and later thrust under the belt of his tight satin breeches. But Carmen caught his arm. "No, no—" and he knew it had been a futile gesture.

He dropped his hand. Feet pounded on the stairs. A moment later the big form of Sergeant Nickell appeared in the doorway, gun in hand, staring in astonishment at the two costumed figures for a full minute before he recognized Gage, whom he knew slightly.

"Still drunk, Gage?" he asked. "Or are you trying to build up an insanity-defense for the murder of that girl?"

HE STEPPED aside and other figurers filed into the room. Maydell came first, pale and hollow eyed, supported by Irving Tetlow who seemed tense but self contained. Basil Deaton followed. He had one arm in a sling and patches of adhesive tape on his face and he glared at Gage belligerently. Last came a uniformed patrolman who lingered in the doorway.

Gage said, "I'm glad you're all here. Mamie Taylor has just made an interesting confession—"

"I'll do my own talking!" the girl

suddenly snapped. She looked at the detective. "My story was a lie, Sergeant. It was I who photographed Joyce Henson here in this attic Wednesday night. It was I who swept the floor afterwards, and—" she shot Gage a defiant look, "it was I who impersonated Joyce in Rio Bravo, took out a marriage license and tricked Gage Ellis, who was drunk, into a marriage. But that's all I did. And it doesn't prove that afterwards Gage Ellis didn't kill Joyce, thinking that it was she who tricked him."

Amidst gasps of amazement, Sergeant Nickell asked, "And why did you do it?"

"Because I wanted Miss Maydell to get Joyce's money," Mamie said. "I didn't think she'd live over her binge. And I'd never have used Ellis in the scheme except that he happened along, stupid with liquor, and I thought that using him would help muddy the water."

"It did," Nickell said. "Maybe it did more than that." He turned to Gage. "You're still in a tough spot, my friend. This girl's confession doesn't clear you. Rather it gives you a motive. Sobering up and finding yourself married, presumably, to Joyce Henson, may have left you murderous bitter about the deception."

CHAPTER VI

The Black-Dinner Ring

GAGE'S eyes swung slowly from the detective to Mamie Taylor. The girl was clever. Her eagerness to speak had seemed to him at first merely an effort to beat him to the gun, to admit what she would have to admit anyhow. Now it came to him that she had had another purpose—to convey to someone in the group just how much she had

been forced to tell.

"Joyce was murdered all right," Gage said, "but not because of any sudden angry impulse. It was cold-blooded and planned in advance. The motive was, of course, Joyce's money."

"But if I understand her father's will," Nickell said, glancing at the silent group by the door, "the only people who could get that money—one way or another—are right here. If Joyce Henson married *before* she died, it would go to Maydell. If Joyce died without marrying, it would be administered by Deaton for a Foundation. But the plot was evidently directed at getting Joyce married. So you must be accusing her sister—"

"I'm not accusing anyone—yet," Gage said. "Let's stick to the facts. Mamie Taylor has not told us the real truth yet, has not told us, for instance, who helped her."

Dr. Irving Tetlow suddenly stepped forward, his face pale, his manner desperately steady. "In a way," he said, "I might be considered an accomplice of Mamie's in her, er—mistake. I must not let her take all the blame. Here is exactly what happened:

"I told you that I saw Joyce early Wednesday night and warned her about her drinking. But I did not tell you that I saw her later. I had worried about her, and just before midnight when my plane was due to leave for Dallas, I came out here again. Joyce was very drunk, was insisting that she was going to die, but that first she was going out and marry the first man she met so that Maydell would get her money. Mamie and I tried to humor her, thinking that we might get her to a sanatorium. We even agreed to make a photograph of her in the bridal dress, since she had got that idea fixed in her mind. Then I tried to slip to the telephone and call an ambulance.

"But Joyce caught on to that. She got her bottle of digitalis and threatened to kill herself unless we let her go. She also forced Mamie to promise that if she failed in her scheme to get married, and failed to show up next day, she, Mamie, would dress in her clothes, go to Rio Bravo and carry through the fake marriage in her name."

"Why did Joyce think she might not show up next day?" Nickell asked. "Was it her bad heart alone that she was afraid of?"

Tetlow hesitated, glanced at Deaton. "Well, to be frank, that was only a part of Joyce's fear. She said that Deaton had been following her about, and she was afraid of him—"

"That's a lie," the lawyer growled. "I did follow her at times—to look after her. But she wasn't afraid of me."

Tetlow shrugged, stared at the lawyer coldly. "She said she was. Well, Mamie and I have confessed our guilt in concealing the truth from the police, and Mamie has admitted her guilty, though well-meaning deception. But let me ask you something, Basil. As things have actually turned out, who gets Joyce's money?"

"The Foundation for War Orphans," Deaton snapped.

"And you administer the money?"

"That's right."

Tetlow turned to Sergeant Nickell. "Well, there you are. After the smoke has cleared away, Deaton profits. I couldn't have killed Joyce myself; my alibi is watertight, so I've got no axe to grind. I'll merely point out that if Deaton happened to be following Joyce Wednesday night, if he happened to overhear her threatening to get married, it might have been a temptation thrown in his way to get her out of the picture before she could do so—and save the money for that cherished Foundation of his."

SERGEANT NICKELL now looked with a new interest at the lanky lawyer who returned his stare defiantly. "Well, Deaton?"

"Well what? It's nothing but a lie. Tetlow's a hypocrite who's marrying Maydell for her money and trifling on her on the sly—" he glanced at Mamie Taylor. "You know what I mean, my girl. But Tetlow's probably playing you for a sucker too."

The girl flushed, then turned pale. Tetlow said, "Pay no attention to him, Mamie. Neither you nor I saw Joyce after she made us photograph her that night. I was in Dallas all the time, and you—"

Gage interrupted him. "Your being in Dallas is not going to help you, Irv. All that elaborate alibi of having a photograph mailed from Rio Bravo yesterday, of having it established that Joyce was alive in Rio Bravo yesterday and last night is washed out. All you can prove now is that you *didn't kill her after you got back*. That's true. The police said she had been dead eighteen hours *or longer*—how much longer was uncertain because of the warm weather, the water she was lying in, and so on. The plain fact is: Joyce never left this house alive Wednesday night at all."

"That's a lie," Mamie Taylor quavered, "I didn't kill her—"

"One of the two of you did," Gage said. "Of course Tetlow tried to build himself an alibi, and left you holding the sack. But Tetlow has admitted himself that he helped photograph her, so at least he was here when she died."

"Can you prove that?" Nickell asked.

Gage went over and picked up the rolled-up enlargement of Joyce's photograph which still lay on the circular table. He opened it out and handed it to Nickell. "Take a look at that smile,"

he invited. "Tell me what sort of smile it is."

Nickell took the photograph and stared. Slowly his lips set in a grim line. "I think I get it now—what you're driving at. The smile's not human, not natural. It's the smile of a corpse, the smile of a dead woman with her face sewed up in some way—probably by a doctor."

Maydell screamed. Carmen hurried to her side and put an arm around her. Gage said, "That's it. And afterward some acid was used to hide the sewing-up business. And of course the fish and the turtles would work on her face so that the acid marks couldn't be identified. And of course Tetlow himself carried her out there sometime before midnight Wednesday night, then hurried to catch the plane for Dallas and left Mamie to carry out the rest of the plot."

Nickell said, "Well it would take a portrait painter to guess the truth about that smile."

"Oh, I didn't," Gage said, "not at first. I knew it was a dead smile only after I had proved that it was."

"Proved?" Tetlow sneered, his face chalk white. "It's idiotic. You can't prove anything of the kind!"

Gage tapped the photograph with a finger. "Look closely at Joyce's hands," he said to Nickell. "She's looking down at her hands herself in the picture. Now what do you see on her left hand?"

Nickell peered closely. "Why it looks like a ring, a black dinner ring of some sort."

"So I thought at first," Gage said. "But it isn't. It isn't a ring at all. It's a spider, a live black spider, just like the others that infest the old draperies stored in this attic. It crawled out on Joyce's hand from the draperies that were used to cover the chair."

"But I don't see—" Nickell began.

"Don't you? Then think a minute. Is it possible that any *living* woman would sit there, looking down at her folded hands, with a smile on her face, while a live black spider was crouching there in plain sight on her finger?"

"Wheew!" Nickell gasped. "Why certainly not!"

"So of course she was dead—killed by the overdose of digitalis that either Tetlow or Mamie Taylor had given her."

"I didn't!" Mamie Taylor began to scream again. "I had nothing to do with it. I didn't know about it until it was done. And he promised to marry me later, if I helped him. He said he'd get rid of Maydell too after he got her money. Only I don't believe now that he would have. He'd have got rid of me instead—"

THEIR eyes were on the screaming girl and until it was too late they did not see Tetlow's hand streak under his coat. Then his gun was blasting, sending two slugs into the screaming girl's breast.

The gun began to swing toward Gage then, as Mamie Taylor crumpled to the floor. But before it had travelled that far, the patrolman at the door had unlimbered his .38 and shot Tetlow between the shoulder blades.

It was all over like that—in seconds. Then silence, and the acrid smell of cordite, and Maydell a sobbing bundle in Gage's arms.

Deaton came over then and patted Maydell clumsily, and she straightened and took his arm and let him lead her from the room.

Gage took a deep breath and turned away from the sight of Nickell bending over the dying girl. Suddenly he began to shake—not inwardly merely, but outwardly, openly, like a man with the palsy.

"Lordy!" he chattered, looking at Carmen. "I haven't had a drink in hours. I even forgot—"

"You forgot," she said, "because you had other things to occupy you."

"But now I'm dying," Gage told her. His teeth rattled like dice. "I've got to get a drink!" He made a dive for the door.

Carmen grabbed his arm. Laughing into his stricken face, she drew from her blouse a flat flask covered in black morocco.

"Glory hallelulah!" Gage made a grab for it.

Carmen retreated to the table. She unscrewed the cap and poured him a drink. When he had gulped it she screwed the cap on tightly again. Gage was staring at the door through which Maydell had gone.

"Broke her heart," he said softly.

Carmen gave him a sharp glance. "This heals all but the deepest wounds, *amigo*."

"The deepest?" he asked. "Meaning what?"

"Meaning you, my blind child," Carmen said. "She has been in love with you all along. Only you made it impossible for her."

"Me? Nonsense!" Gage looked at the flask. "*Una mas, chiquita?* One more!" he wheedled. As she hesitated he seized her in his arms and kissed her. "*Florequita!* We will be married in *la mañana*, of a certainty!"

Carmen freed herself and turned away. There was a suspicion of moisture in her eyes as she faced him again, but laughter was on her lips. "So, eet

ees of a certainty now? *Bueno*. I weel speak to Geronimo."

"To Geronimo?"

"It would only be fair. My dancing partner and I are married. Bot Geronimo," she smiled wickedly, "he weel step aside."

"I'll bet he would," Gage laughed.

Carmen became sober. "Bot seriously, my fran, thees Maydell needs you. Maybe to win her back ees simpler than you theenk. I weel show you how—" She opened the flask and poured another drink. "Will you have a dreenk, my fran?"

"Will I?" Gage grabbed it greedily. He continued to look at the flask like a famished dog at a butcher's window.

"*Bueno*," Carmen said. "That part of the lesson you know. Now—" she filled the cup again. "Have another—? Bot wait—" She brushed his reaching hand aside, nodded toward the table top and with a fingertip traced the word: "No."

"Say it," she ordered. "That ees what you must learn."

"No."

Carmen threw the drink on the floor and capped the flask. "Well, that ees all. To win her back that ees all you need to know."

"You think so?"

"I am a woman," Carmen said. "I do not theenk—I know."

"I wonder—" Gage looked at her a moment longer, a slow smile spreading over his face. "Worth trying anyhow." Gallantly he took her arm and they walked toward the door through which Maydell had vanished.

BROKEN HOMES AND CRIME

PUZZLING as it may seem, the problem of divorce in the U. S. has a direct bearing on the problem of juvenile delinquency. A recent report brought out the astounding fact that at least one out of every five marriages in this country ends in divorce, and indications are that the ratio is rapidly reaching one to three.

Probably the most serious effect of this rapid

increase in divorces is felt among children. In 1936 it was estimated that 150,000 children were thus affected by divorce; in 1946 the number had gone up to 300,000—double what it was ten years ago! There is justifiable alarm among authorities these days when we realize that undoubtedly 50% of juvenile delinquents come from broken homes.—*Pete Boggs*.

SWINDLERS IN SHIRT SLEEVES



By
SANDY MILLER



THE sign of the three glass balls marked the outposts of one of the greatest unorganized rackets of petty thievery the people of the 1880's were to know. Although there supposedly existed legal curbs on the pawnbrokers' multifarious activities, these laws were ignored. For instance, it was clearly stated on the statute books of New York that pawnbrokers could not legally charge more than twenty-five per cent per annum on any loan under \$25, or seven per cent on a loan of more than \$25. The law also specified that the excess they received over the amount advanced the borrower must be returned to the borrower. Although deviations from these rates was the rule rather than the exception, no one ever heard of a pawnbroker being punished.

The 1880's were wild and loose days in New York's infamous Bowery area. Petty thieves and sharpers were busy at their double-dealing occupations. They found plenty of suckers to swindle. But the pawnbroker can be singled out as perhaps the most despised swindler of all; many of his suckers were people in desperate straits, down to their last few cents—jobless and hungry.

Diamonds, watches, silverware, etc., were retained at the outrageous rate of ten per cent of a loan per month—amounting to a 120 per cent total interest for the year instead of the specified twenty-five per cent. And as if this wasn't enough, the Bowery pawnbroker sometimes found ways of adding other charges. Unscrupulous moneylenders would tack on a fifty cent storage charge for keeping the article in the safe instead of on the counter. There was sometimes a charge of from a quarter to a dollar for the hanging up of suits and dresses. Some shops rented bags to wrap the articles charging as much as \$5 a year for this dubious service.

Much harder to deal with—had the law been interested in doing so—would be the man who plied his trade from door to door. There were many cases of such underhanded activities as that of the traveling "pawnbroker" who called at private homes and asked the lady of the house if she wished to borrow any money on jewelry or fine articles of wearing apparel. If the loan was made and renewed, they often demanded an extra "fee" for keeping the matter secret from the woman's husband or father. In fact the sizable sums of money that exchanged hands for this purpose alone is hard to estimate.

BLACKMAIL was not the least scurulous of the pawnbroker's rackets. Other ways to cheat the public were developed. One was to stock a quantity of "phony" jewelry and enter each piece as a pledge, issuing tickets marked from one to five dollars each. Then a henchman would be sent out to scatter the tickets here and there on the street to make them appear as though they had been dropped there by accident. When these tickets were found and brought back by an unsuspecting but inquisitive fellow (and they almost always were) he was charged a quarter for the favor of being allowed to see the pawned article. Sometimes the stranger would redeem the pledge—or he might go out and sell the ticket to someone else, which would put at least another twenty-five cents in the pawnbroker's pocket for showing the goods.

The era of unscrupulous practices such as these is not entirely over—sorry to say—but law enforcement officials keep a much closer regulating eye upon the activities of the moneylender these days than they did in those last roaring decades before the turn of the century.

DON'T TOUCH THAT!

A FAMOUS professor of criminology made this fundamental statement about what to do at the scene of a crime:

"Never alter the position or pick up or touch anything at the scene of a crime until all the facts relating to the crime are contained in a report."

In other words, until the situation is carefully diagrammed, until it has been photographed—especially in major crimes—no one should be allowed to touch anything. The slightest movement will alter an object and the slightest touch may alter the situation and lose a conviction.

But to conduct a successful examination at the scene of a crime something should be done about the women of the house! The detective goes to the room where the crime occurred. The housewife leads the way. She pulls the drawers of a bureau open and says, "Look here." Thereupon she handles the articles in the drawer, putting her fingerprints

on the fingerprints of the thief, the result being that not only is all valuable fingerprint evidence destroyed, but the details of how the thief operates and helpful in identifying him are obliterated.

A woman is fussy about her home. If a hairbrush or an ashtray happens to look out of order, she wants to put it back in place so the police officer will not consider her a poor housekeeper. The detective, of course, is not interested in a woman's housekeeping ability. What he wants to know is what the burglar did after he entered the house and whether or not he left traces behind that might identify him.

Some police departments, as a result of this "housewife problem," follow the practice of sending two men to conduct a burglary investigation. One detective searches for clues, while the other watches the "little woman" of the house, preventing her from destroying evidence.—A. Morris.

Murder Makes Me Mad

by Maurice Sachs



Did that old fool and his dog intend
to stand there the rest of the night?

"LARRY, someone's coming!"

I stopped, almost thrown off balance by the sudden alarm in Gale's voice; she seemed on the verge of hysteria.

I hugged the wall, balancing myself on the two steps of iron stairway leading to the driveway, and turned my

body so that the dead man would be concealed in the shadows. My shoulder protested by twinges of dagger-like pains under the dead weight it was supporting. But I waited, thankful that I had almost reached the protective concealment of my Chevy.

"Hope my dog didn't frighten you, Ma'am." The polite voice was deeply apologetic.

"Oh no, he didn't."

"These Kerry Blue terriers are very friendly . . . Come on Michael Patrick, shake hands with the nice lady."

I gritted my teeth and stifled a moan.

This, Larry told himself, would be just a mild flirtation. But all he got was his arms full of corpse!



Why don't Gale get rid of that guy and his dog?

Then the dog started to growl, softly, fearfully; and then it let out a mournful wail as his ancestors may have done at the Banshees of Old Ireland.

My heart began to pound and for the moment I felt utterly incapable of supporting the body. That dog smelled a dead man and was telling his master. I waited for the animal to lunge up the stairs at me, exposing the murder. Sweat chilled my body and I shivered from fright, and then . . .

"All right, Mike. Don't have to tell me; you're hungry, aren't you, old boy?"

The Irish terrier kept on moaning and growling.

"Excuse us, Ma'am, but we have to leave. Say goodbye to the nice lady, Mike." His honeyed words faded as he dragged the snivelling, moaning dog away from the entrance to the driveway.

I didn't wait for Gale to tell me it was safe to proceed. I hurried down the last few steps and safely deposited the body in the rear of the car. I leaned against the door, spent and tired and almost completely unnerved.

"Are you all right, Larry?" Gale's face was drawn and barely discernable in the dark.

I nodded. "Don't worry," I said. "I'll get rid of the—" I swallowed the lump that welled up in my throat, "—the body. I'll get back as quickly as possible. Wait up for me."

I got behind the steering wheel and turned on the ignition. The red gas indicator pointed to the halfway mark. It was dark now and I was anxious to be on my way. My destination was uncertain but the quicker I left the better.

I backed the car out of the driveway and into the street. When I pulled

up at the curb, Gale leaned over and planted a kiss on my lips. "Be careful, honey," she admonished. "I'll wait up for you." I waved my hand, started the motor and headed south.

BEING this far south and so close to the Lake, my best bet would be around the Sand Dunes in Indiana. I kept the car down to twenty-five miles an hour until I hit U.S. 41. I was driving very slow and very carefully and I made no attempt to beat out the red traffic lights until I picked up U.S. 12 in Hammond. Traffic was light and I made better time on the four-lane highway. I looked at my wrist watch. It was eight-thirty; with any luck I should be in Gary by nine. I made it right on the nose.

The ghostly reddish-yellow lights cast by the flames from the tall chimneys of the steel mills caused goose pimples to chase up and down my back. I thought of the dead man behind me; and of his soul; and of purgatory; and of the electric chair, and I fought off the desire to press on the accelerator and get rid of the dead man as quickly as possible. But a single headlight reflected in my rear view mirror squashed the temptation. I waited, breathless, for the motorcycle to bypass me, and the sigh of relief that came from my throat could have been heard back in Chicago when a flivver raced by me burning only one headlight.

I kept on U.S. 12, circled around Gary, and about five miles past the city, the road narrowed into a two lane highway. It was very dark, no moon, and best of all, no traffic. I was hitting about forty-five, for I knew that the state police usually patrolled the main four-lane highway U.S. 24 that ran almost parallel to U.S. 12 and carried most of the traffic.

It was very lonely on the road and I

turned on the radio to get some sort of companionship. In a few seconds I heard the sound of a man's voice. It was a news commentator and I listened avidly to his analysis of the progress of Eisenhower's armies in France; of the problems in Washington; and his reporting of the local news. When he reported that a train, making up lost time, had hit a truck and killed two men near Joliet, I switched over to some dance music. I had enough killing for one day.

The motor droned evenly and steadily and the headlights bored far ahead into the dark; and then, created perhaps by the soft music from the radio and by my exhaustion from past events I had the impression that I was seated in a movie. The headlights were the light from the projection room focusing upon the black screen of the summer night sky; and then an image began to move on that screen. The image of a man. It grew larger and larger until it came up almost to the radiator of the car. That image became vaguely familiar and as it came into clear focus, I started. For that image was me as I was coming out of Reynold's Drug Store about five hours ago. . . .

IT WAS hot—damned hot, and a half hour spent in the air conditioned Reynold's Drug Store made the heat more intense when I walked out into the blinding glare of the July sun. The perspiration redrenched my collar which already had the appearance of a frustrated accordion, and soaked through my shirt and through the material of my light tan sport jacket.

I shook the perspiration out of my eyes and walked to my car parked in the protective shade of a forlorn looking tree. It was a few minutes past four and I decided that the Acme Pharmaceutical and Biological Company,

Incorporated, would forgive their Chicago sales representative if he were to shed a limp jacket and loosen the strangling grip of his collar and tie and cease work for the day. The Chicago representative, in due appreciation for such solicitude, would refrain from adding the price of a couple of tall Tom Collins to his always inadequate expense account.

I got into the car and, heeding the wishes of the Acme Pharmaceutical and Biological Company, began the delightful process of shedding surplus apparel, when all thoughts of the heat and summer vacations and expense accounts disappeared from my mind as completely as overcoats from the baking streets of Chicago.

No, it wasn't a change in the weather that stimulated my desire to improve my personal appearance, but about five-feet-four of perfect feminine beauty that suddenly crossed my line of vision. Reddish blond hair in a circular sort of an upsweep, a pert nose, vivid lips, a delightful chin, and a lithe willowy body in a flowery print crisp dress that did not hide enticing curves, did more for me then a dozen Tom Collins to a thirsty man on a desert.

She seemed to be in a hurry and as she glided along the sidewalk her eyes were busy searching for something that would take her some place fast. I turned the key in the ignition, started the motor and was in motion. "This," I thought, "is not going to be the average pickup but will require finesse."

"Can I give you a lift?" I stopped the word 'babe' in time. She gave me a cold distant glance and continued on her way. I shrugged my shoulders, cursed the sweat that streamed down the middle of my back, and again put the car in motion. But I slammed on the brakes when I saw her hesitate, turn her head and smile at me.

WITHOUT a word I opened the door and she got in. I inhaled the cool fragrance of some prewar cologne she was wearing and started to make conversation.

"Hot, isn't it?" There is nothing like the weather to get acquainted with a stranger.

She nodded in agreement, then she turned to me.

"Will you do a favor for me?"

"I sure will."

"Will you drive me to the LaSalle Street Station? I must be there by four-thirty and I know I'm late."

I moaned softly to myself. Here I pick up a gorgeous creature and now she has to leave town.

"I'll get you there at four-twenty-nine, Miss—?"

"Oh, excuse me. My name is Gale Woods."

"And mine is Larry Richland. How do you do?"

In the meantime I was making a U turn on 63rd street and heading for the Outer Drive. I adjusted the side vents to capture any wayward breezes. We picked up a few in Jackson Park.

"Going to be gone long?"

"Why, I'm not going any place."

"Then why the LaSalle Street Station in a hurry?" My spirits were beginning to show life.

"Oh," she smiled and my spirits were hitting on all eight, "I'm going to say goodbye to a friend of mine and he'll be furious if I'm not there on time."

"He?"

"Yes, my boy friend. Doesn't the Lake look gorgeous?"

That reminded me that we were on the Outer Drive and I had to watch my speedometer. My expense account doesn't cover speed tickets and I needed my gas coupons for my vacation.

The lake did look good: bluish green ruffled by a few white-caps. The shore-

line was thickly covered by lucky refugees from the heat, a few in the water, but most of them exposing their bodies to the penetrating rays of a relentless sun.

"One week from today, Miss Woods, and my magnificent physique will be wallowing in that Lake."

"Vacation?"

"Yep, two weeks starting Sunday."

"Staying in town?"

I thought I caught a message in that politely asked question.

"Well-l-l-l," I drawled, "It depends on certain people I'd like to know better."

"You must look like a prize fighter in a bathing suit." She had her head turned towards me now.

"I did do some amateur fighting a few years ago," I said, "But a lucky punch put an end to my career."

"Do you think we'll make it?"

"Make what?"

"The station, silly."

"Oh, the station." I had completely forgotten where we were going and if she hadn't reminded me, I would have hit Wisconsin by nightfall.

It was exactly four-thirty when I pulled up in front of the station. I told her that trains never leave on time anymore and that I'll be waiting for her at the side entrance. She said that would be lovely and in a moment she was lost in the crowd.

I FOUND a parking space near the door and luckily it was a comparatively cool spot so I wasn't so warm. I would have been more comfortable in sport shirt and slacks, but I wasn't doing so bad now and I let it go at that.

I filled my pipe with tobacco and lighted up. There is nothing like a pipe stuck in a masculine face to impress the members of the beautiful sex, and she was one member of that sex I wanted really to impress.

She was gone about fifteen minutes when I saw her looking around. I pressed on the horn and waved to her and she was back in the car, a bit breathless. No, she didn't make it; the train left on time, the crowds were fierce, and she was exhausted. I clucked my tongue sympathetically and told her that I was sorry and how about a couple of tall cool ones to reinstate our good faith in railroads. She leaned back, inhaled the fragrance of the tobacco smoke, closed her eyes and said it was okay by her.

I knew just the place: a restaurant on the Outer Drive. Tables under large sunshades and an excellent view of the Lake. The drive was made in silence and I thought that she was sleeping, but her eyes were not entirely closed and she appeared to be thinking.

The Lake View Inn was crowding up as we arrived, but we found a table, ordered a couple of Tom Collins, and I started to get acquainted.

"Feel better now, Miss Woods?" I refilled my pipe and blew some smoke in her direction.

"Oh yes, much better and I think it'll sound better if you will call me Gale."

Well, this pilgrim was really making progress. "Larry and Gale, a nice sounding combination," I said. She smiled and then she suddenly jumped to her feet.

"Will you excuse me, Larry? I've got to make a phone call." She motioned to the approaching drum majorette bringing our drinks, asked directions and hurried toward the Inn proper. I leaned back in the blue leather-and-chrome chair and tried to imagine that a cool offlake breeze was enveloping my six foot frame. The old glass held in the palm of my hand furthered the illusion. . . .

"Asleep?"

I started. I must have dozed off. "No," I said, "just relaxing. Did you make your call?"

She nodded and I noticed that she had freshened up a bit.

"Drinks cold?"

"Not as cold as they should be but we'll get more." I raised my glass. "Here's to a cold day in July."

We drained our glasses in a hurry and I ordered another round of the same.

"Lucky fellow," I said.

"Who?"

"The one you went to say goodbye to."

"Oh."

"Are you engaged to him?"

"Sort of."

I toyed with my glass, waiting for the drum majorette to replace it with some tongue-loosener.

"Why should I be?" It was my turn to be noncommittal.

"Don't be like that, Larry. After all, Ed took me out of the Yvonne Dancing Studio where I was an instructress and set me up in my own apartment with plenty of spending money and we expect to get married as soon as he gets a divorce. And this is the third time I missed the train when he left town."

"I'm sure he'll forgive you."

"Not Ed. He's got a whale of a temper. His name is Ed Krueger, a wholesale jewelry salesman, and he's going to Peoria."

I DIDN'T say anything, but waited while our empty glasses were being replaced by some full ones; in the meantime I was thinking how one Larry Richland inside of a half an hour was getting some heavy come-hither glances from a dame engaged to a married traveling salesman.

"Larry."

"Yes."

"Tell me something about yourself."

"Not much to tell, Gale. I'm close to thirty, single and live alone in a hotel at Winthrop and Marine Drive. I'm a registered pharmacist by profession and was pulled out of my drug store by the draft and was placed in the Navy as Pharmacist Mate, second class. Then they attached me to the Marine Corps and shipped down to Guadalcanal. Things were a bit rugged down there and I got two Jap bullets in my right shoulder and, after being in the hospital a couple of months, was shipped home. Then they gave me a medical discharge and now I'm what they call a detail man for the Acme Pharmaceutical and Biological Co. That means that I try to sell medicines and drugs and vaccines to drug stores and hospitals; and I call on about four doctors a day and tell them about some of the stuff we make and try to convince them their patients would recover faster if the doc would prescribe our preparations."

"Mm-m-m," she sighed. "I'll bet that's an interesting job. But what about your shoulder. Does it hurt much?"

"No," I said. "The docs did a swell repair job, but I can't raise my right arm above shoulder level. Mighty inconvenient, too."

"Why?" she asked.

I sighed. "Unless they put steering wheels on the right hand side of the post-war car, I won't be able to do any one hand driving."

She laughed, one of those musical kinds of laughs, and said that she didn't believe that I'd have much trouble in that respect.

The second drinks must have had a little more gin than usual for I noticed beads of perspiration appearing on Gale's forehead and my shirt collar was getting another bath and a new dispatcher was sending more streams of perspiration over different routes down

my back. Gale dabbed at her forehead with a wisp of a handkerchief. She pushed back her chair and stood up. "Come on, Larry, lets go to my place where I can get into something more comfortable, and you can unbutton that shirt collar."

I slammed a couple of dollars on the table and grabbed Gale's arm and almost carried her into the car. "Boy!" I was thinking. "What a break."

"Where do you live?" I asked.

"Drive south, Larry. It's a small street near 79th street. I'll have to direct you from there."

SHE directed me to an apartment house located on a two-block-long street. It was a quiet sort of a street, lined with trees and hedges, and well-kept, clean-cut lawns. The buildings were mostly large apartment houses, the fifteen to twenty-five flat type, brown-stone, ornate designed, dignified looking, where the tenants can live for years without knowing their next door neighbor. It was an ideal street to live on when you want to mind your own business and let your neighbors mind theirs.

We stopped in front of a three-floor, six-flat apartment building, yellow brick with white tile facings, intricate grill-work around the entrance. Brass and metal gleamed brightly and the place oozed with dignity and high rental. Gale indicated the sidedrive leading to a six-car garage in the rear and suggested that I pull up there out of the sun, but I shook my head. It was about six-thirty and the sun wasn't so hot now and besides I'd block the driveway and some tenant might object and she would be listed as an undesirable tenant and be evicted.

We walked up to the first floor and Gale opened her purse and began to search through its contents for a key.

She stamped her foot impatiently. "Damn," she muttered, "I must have lost my key again. Larry, wait here; I'll get another key from the janitor."

"Another key?"

"The way I lose keys, I have to keep a stock of them with Bill. It'll only take a minute."

The shrill, demanding burr of the phone bell within her apartment began to sound. With a "I'll be back in a jiffy, Larry," she ran down the stairs. The bell kept burring away for awhile, then with a faint tinkle, stopped. It was very quiet until Gale's return with the key.

Her apartment was a sumptuous four-and-a-half room affair; tastefully and neatly and expensively furnished. Green and yellow dominated the color scheme, creating a cool and comfortable atmosphere. I sat down on a green leather lounge chair conveniently placed next to a combination radio and victrola and bar. "All I need now, Gale, is a drink in one hand and you in the other."

"You'll find ginger ale or soda in the refrigerator, Larry, and as for me, I'll be in the shower." She planted a quick kiss on my cheek and disappeared in the bedroom which was just off the living room.

I heard her rustling around in there, then the swish of water from the shower splashing on her body reminded me that a drink would be welcome. I reached into the bar—which was close behind the chair—and located a pint bottle of Scotch which I quickly brought out into the light of day. But I didn't pour a drink. A beautiful shiny .32 revolver fell to the floor. It must have been in front of the Scotch. I picked it up and examined it. All chambers were filled with copper-headed bullets and the gun was ready for action. "A swell hiding place for a gun," I thought. "Especially for a tired traveling jewelry salesman."

I shrugged my shoulders and winced when a stab of pain jolted through my right shoulder.

THE phone rang again and Gale called out for me to answer the damn thing. I picked the one-piece instrument up from its cradle on a desk near the door and said hello. There was no response and I said it again. Again no response. I had the impression that someone was listening. I heard a faint sharp click and the line went dead. Whoever, it was had hung up. I replaced the phone and went back to my Scotch and gun.

"Who was it, Larry?" She must have completed her shower; I couldn't hear the running water.

"I don't know. Whoever it was hung up or else we got disconnected. How you doing?"

"I'll be out in a shake. And how's the drink?"

I told her I was waiting for her and went into the small compact kitchen for the makings. I had a bit of trouble getting the ice cube tray out of the shelf; and when I returned Gale was entering the living room from her adjoining bedroom, firmly closing the door.

I just stood and stared and who could blame me? She certainly looked cool in the crisp, bright green two piece play suit she was wearing. You know the kind of play suit—halter and shorts that hide nothing and reveal everything. Her hair was piled high on her head and just a bit of a matching green ribbon held it in place.

I held out my arms but she shook her head.

"Larry, you look like something the cat dragged in and dragged out again. I should have told you to wash up in the extra washroom next to the kitchen. And for heaven's sake, loosen that collar."

I doused my face in plenty of cold water and combed my hair and opened my collar. She had the drinks mixed when I got back and she was sitting on the edge of the leather arm chair, studying the .32 on the combination.

"Where did you find the revolver?" she asked quietly. I told her it fell out of the bar compartment.

"I didn't know Ed kept a gun in the apartment."

"Well," I said, "you can't blame the guy for wanting to protect valuable things such as jewels and a gem like you."

She smiled and I began to do things to her lips. After a while, we unclinked. I picked up the drinks, handed one to her and we clicked glasses.

"To us," she whispered, and we tilted our drinks. We never finished them.

"You two-timing rat." The voice was low and unhurried, but cold and deadly.

I WHIRLED around and met the fixed, unblinking eyes set in a hard, grim expressionless face of a slim, well-built man standing in the doorway. His arms were hanging straight at his sides, fingers touching the seams of his blue-gray trousers. He was motionless except for the muscular contractions of his throat.

I heard Gale gasp: "Ed. Why it's Ed." I didn't move, but I felt like diving through the nearest window. I wasn't scared, but I hate these triangular affairs, especially when the other man has a mean look and apparently a mean disposition.

"I knew you were up to something when you didn't show up at the station, again." His lips barely moved, but the words were loaded with T.N.T.

Gale made an effort to speak. "I was there, but I was late."

"You're a liar."

"No she's not, I drove her there myself," I said.

"You shut up! I'll do all of the talking."

He snarled like a tiger.

He reminded me of Humphrey Bogart, but I had a feeling that I had seen him before. He was too tough to be a jewelry salesman. Unless he was peddling off hot stuff. Hot jewelry, that was it! I'd seen his picture in the paper many times. Pictures of police showups; of police questionings and of police hunts.

He kept on talking. In a low bitter tone with a trace of accent. He was calling her unprintable names, questioning her ancestry and working himself into a rage. Gale resembled a marble statue. A statue portraying stark terror, and shrinking from it.

I kept quiet and I didn't move. Trouble was in the air like a storm cloud.

"I told you, Gale, that if I ever catch any guy in this apartment, I'll beat him to death with my two fists. And this guy's it."

"Okay, big guy, get yourself set for the beating of your life." The words hit me like pieces of shrapnel. I didn't want to fight, but I felt sure that I could handle myself.

He started to walk towards me, slowly, menacingly.

He had loosened his collar and rolled up his shirt sleeves, exposing thick, hairy, muscular arms. He was close to me now, still talking low.

"You understand, there's nothing personal about this." The half-smile on his mask-like face was twisted out of shape. "You shouldn't have answered the phone."

It was no use trying to reason with him. I glanced hastily about the room, surveying it as the site of a potential battlefield.

THE floor of the large living room was cluttered with cocktail tables and floor lamps and commodes and other bits of the decorator's art. But there was a small clear space right where we were standing, in front of Gale's bedroom door and the leather lounge chair. It was going to be a slugging match. No retreating.

Then he hit me—a solid punch hard in the stomach and I gasped and doubled over. He could have done more damage with a battering ram but not much more. After that punch, things got a bit hazy. He kept hitting me in the body: hard, mean blows that had experience behind them. I was helpless. Winded and tired and defenseless, my arms refused to obey the commands of my brain.

I realized that he wasn't going to knock me out. Not until he could demonstrate to Gale what the next victim would get if he were caught in her apartment.

A hard, sharp jab to my right shoulder sent me reeling. I fell against Gale and we both fell to the floor. But I landed in a sitting position, my legs out straight, the full length of my spine flush against the bedroom door. I knew it was a door, for the back of my head had bounced hard against the glass door knob. The door seemed a bit slanted as if it were opened a little, but for that matter, so did the room seem to list to port.

"Here, Larry, take this." I could barely hear Gale's voice through the hammering in my ears.

I felt cold steel in my right hand and at the same time I saw a foot poised as if to kick a football. My face was to be the football.

I raised my arm to ward off the kick. But his foot just hung in mid-air and he stood there, balancing himself as if he were walking on a tight rope. Then he

sagged to the floor, his head just a fraction of an inch from the sole of my shoe—a hole drilled neatly through his forehead.

The echo of the shot from the .32 in my hand kept bouncing from wall to wall, from ceiling to floor; touching every piece of furniture in the room and then grouping together and pounding into my brain. I passed out. Cold.

. . . I felt suspended in space surrounded by doors which opened and closed to the rhythm of an orchestra playing the anvil chorus with anvils. People were walking over me, and someone was trying to pull my arms out of their sockets. Cold icicles surrounded my head . . . and I opened my eyes.

I was lying full length on the floor, parallel to the wall. Gale was holding ice-cubes wrapped in a towel to my head and the cold application seemed to clear my head almost magically.

I managed a weak smile at her pale face and the smile she returned was just as weak and sick. She put her arm under my head and helped me to a sitting position. I got to my feet on my own power.

THE body on the floor steadied my nerves, and I stared hard at the sightless unblinking eyes and the dark, round hole between them which gave him an ogre-like appearance.

I caught a glimpse of my own face in the mirror suspended over the false fireplace and I was amazed at the image. There wasn't a scratch or any discoloration in sight. He had concentrated his punches solely on my stomach and shoulders and chest.

"Shall I call the police, Larry?" Gale was at the desk and she was watching me anxiously.

The police. I hadn't thought of calling anybody; the neighbors would han-

dle that angle with the average neighbors would handle that angle with the average neighbor's usually efficient manner. But apparently no one had notified the law, for as yet there were no wailing sirens, no skidding prowls cars turning corners on two wheels, and no policemen barging in and lining up the suspects.

"I think it would be best, Gale," I said. She nodded her head but only stood there, watching me closely. I felt wobbly, but I didn't give it a thought as I carefully scrutinized the face of the dead man.

Then I felt sick. "Gale . . ." I barely managed the name.

"Why, Larry, what's wrong?" She ran to me and put an arm around my waist.

"Plenty, Gale, plenty. What did you say his name was?"

She hesitated for a brief moment. "Ed Krueger."

"Gale, that guy is Ed Gregorio, former light-heavy-weight contender, bootlegger, racketeer, and mixed up in every gang war to take place in Chicago in the last five years. I thought he looked familiar to me."

I was thinking and talking simultaneously. "If you call the police, we'll have Gregorio's mob on us and our lives won't be worth a German mark on Maxwell Street. They'll get us both for killing him. No, Gale, don't call the police."

She didn't move an eyelash; she just stood there, stunned and shocked.

"Are you sure?"

"Sure?" I was happy that I had an alibi for the beating I had received. "Only a professional box-fighter knows where to hit to render his opponent helpless. I've seen his face in newspapers so often, I've wondered what his morgue file would be like. In fact, down in the South Pacific, my C.P.O. said

that Gregorio's scrap book could be published in volumes like the Encyclopedia Britannica. I'm sure, all right."

Gale was still standing beside me, her arm around my waist. Her arm was quivering and I could feel her shoulder shake nervously.

Perspiration again began to drip from my forehead, and drops of the salt solution ran around my eyelids and smarted my eyes. "It's funny," I thought, "but the best way to forget the heat was to kill someone."

I started to wipe some of the perspiration out of my eyes but the slam of a gun butt against my head almost threw me into a state of shock. It was the .32 and I had been holding it in my right hand all the time.

Gale shivered violently when she saw the weapon. She steadied herself and walked unsteadily to the green leather chair and sat down heavily. That gun stayed in my hand as if it were glued there; I couldn't shake it loose. I poured a couple of drinks and we drank them straight.

"Larry, what are we going to do?"

"There's only one thing to do, Gale, and that is to get rid of Ed," I said.

"But how?"

I tried to think logically. "Well," I said. "First of all, no one has reported anything to the police. Chances are that anyone who heard the shot thought it was a backfire from some motorcycle or something, so we're all right so far.

"Secondly, whoever knew Ed intimately would think that he is on his way to Peoria and wouldn't miss him for a few days. Except, of course, his friends in Peoria and they would think that he had changed his mind."

I sat down on the arm of the leather chair and put my arm around Gale's neck. She leaned back and she seemed more relaxed.

"Now, here is the way I figure it out,"

I said. "If we report the—" I hesitated on the word "killing to the police, and we get off with a self defense plea, we're still cooked. Therefore, the smartest thing to do is to dump Gregorio out in the country somewhere and make it look like a gang killing.

"You'll pull the car in the driveway and I will carry him down the fire-escape. It's pretty dark now and, if you stand guard out in front, with any luck we might get away with it. What do you think?"

She didn't answer, but put her head back and puckered her lips. I kissed her hard. She got up and pointed to the gun. "What about that?"

"I'll have to throw it away somewhere along the road after I wipe off the fingerprints."

"Okay, Larry." She drew a deep breath. "It'll take me a few seconds to tidy up and I'll be ready."

I POURED a couple of more drinks and we silently raised our glasses. She murmured something about our success and we drank. After she left the room, I looked at my watch. It was a little past eight and though it wasn't very dark outside, a few thunderheads were gathering around the setting sun, and they cast enough shadows to conceal my movements.

When Gale returned, I told her to clean the room after I left and she said not to worry; it would be spick and span. Fortunately, there was very little blood on the floor and a good scrubbing would remove all traces. She had put a dress over her playsuit and I told her it was a smart thing to do because she sure would attract a lot of attention in that first outfit. I gave her the key to the car.

We kissed again and Gale opened the door, waved her hand slightly and ran down the stairs. I straightened my tie

and put on my jacket and I placed the .32 in the pocket. Then I tried to pick up the body and put it across my shoulder but I had a difficult time of it; and after wrestling with the heavy corpse, I managed to carry it. . . .

I SHOOK my head. Where was I?

The motor droned evenly and some comedian was working hard to extract some laughter from a studio audience. I switched off the radio and slowed down. The thunderheads were reinforced by more of their cohorts and together they covered the night sky.

Then I saw a white enamel sign bearing the legend: ANDREWTON P. 108 "Perfect," I thought, for about a mile further on was a dirt road leading to some cottages near the beach in the Dunes. But because of the deep ruts this road was seldom used, the resorters preferred a paved one a few hundred feet ahead.

I circled around a deserted, unpainted gas station and soon I was bumping along in the deep ruts. About half a mile of riding brought me to the top of a long steep hill that sloped down to the beach. I stopped the car and turned off the lights and opened the door. I leaned over the back of my seat and grabbed holt of the collar of the dead man's shirt and with sweat pouring out of every pore, I pushed the body out of the car. Then I closed the door.

I started the motor and when the car began to glide down the hill, I turned off the ignition and coasted to the beach. The lights were still off.

When I reached the hard road that ran parallel to the beach, I again started the motor and soon I was on the new paved road that led me back to the main highway. This section of the Dunes was sparsely settled and no one was on the road, and hoped I was undetected.

I kept going south when I got back on U.S. 12. I had an alibi thought out if for any any reason the police would pick me up as a suspect. I was headed for the popular resort town of Grant Beach, which was about five miles away, and it was a few minutes past ten when I arrived there.

Grant Beach was built on both sides of the three mile long combination street and highway, and consisted of cottages and rooming houses and one or two hotels, with signs "Room for Rent" in front of most of them. Sand, blown down from the towering dunes, covered everything, but the stone-free beach that skirted the left side of the road compensated for any discomforts created by the ever-present sand. It was here that I had made reservations for my vacation.

I carefully drove through the heavy traffic and when I saw an overhanging, red neon sign proclaiming the High-Top Hotel, I threw the car in second gear and followed a winding driveway up to a long, rambling modernistic white stone house perched on one of the dunes, and parked in an areaway in the rear.

Someone threw on a switch and pale yellow light guided me to a wooden stairway. I walked slowly up the stairs to a patio that overlooked the lake. There were a few people lounging about, enjoying the cool breeze from the lake, and I asked an elderly lady if Edith Horliss was in. She said yes and that I would find her in the kitchen.

EDITH HORLISS was the ideal type of hotel manager. Soft-spoken and calm, she ran things efficiently and smoothly, but with an iron hand. The comfort of her guests was always uppermost in her orderly mind, and being one of her favorites before the war, I naturally made it my business to spend my

vacation with her.

I found her in the spotless white-tiled electric kitchen, sitting on a stool and sipping iced tea.

"Hi, girl friend?" I whispered the greeting because of a lump in my throat. All this seemed so prewarish that memories of the past months and of the past few hours were like a nightmare dissolved by warm clean sunshine.

"Larry—Larry Richland!" A pair of massive arms encircled my neck and wet resounding kisses smacked on my cheeks. It felt good and I returned her embrace.

She pushed a chair at me and in the same movement fished a succulent ham out of the oversized refrigerator and thick, meaty sandwiches were placed before me. I ate ravenously, taking big bites, and I didn't pause until the sandwiches were washed down by two tall glasses of iced tea.

"Now, Larry, tell me: What are you doing out here now? I didn't expect you until Saturday afternoon."

"Well, Edith, it's so damn hot in Chicago that when one of my doctors gave me a couple of extra gas coupons, I decided to take a ride out here and see if my room will be ready. I got here about seven-thirty, but you were out shopping or something, so I sat on the beach and fell asleep. I just got up and here I am."

I waited anxiously for her next words, for I based my alibi on her habits she had had in the past. She would get away from her guests by driving to Michigan City, two miles away, after dinner, ostensibly to do some shopping, and by the time she got back, the guests would have forgotten their demands. By this method she would capture a couple of hours of relaxation.

"I'm sorry, Larry," she said, "but if I had known you were here, I would have been back earlier."

I managed to control my facial muscles. I was all set. If I should ever need an alibi, I had one. Perfect.

We then talked about some of my experiences in the South Pacific, and how much money the civilians were making, and about the weather, until I got up and stretched my legs. I told her that I had to get going because of an early appointment with the sales manager. She walked with me down to the car and in a few minutes I was on my way back to Chicago.

The drive back was uneventful, except for a stop in Gary to replenish my dwindling gas supply at an open-all-night gas station. I made good time on the road. I was doing a lot of thinking, but my thoughts were all so jumbled and incoherent and vague that I couldn't remember much of them.

A sudden noisy and electrical thunder shower almost tropical in its fierceness and volume and brevity, washed away the sticky heat, and I hoped it would also wash away any telltale tire imprints on that lonely road in the dunes.

IT WAS close to one o'clock when I pressed the bell to Gale's apartment and the instant buzzing that released the door lock was a very welcome sound. Gale was all right and was waiting for me.

She was dressed in deep black pajamas that accentuated her blond beauty and shapely figure. A few cigarette butts in an ashtray, and an open book next to a tall glass containing amber fluid and ice cubes and a couple of mussed-up cushions on the pale green brocaded divan gave the long room a lived-in atmosphere. The room did look a bit different than the last time I was there, but a long kiss from Gale's red lips put a period to my analysis.

"Gee, but it's good to see you, Larry

—I was worried. Is everything all right?"

"Better than that, kid; it's perfect," I said.

She sighed, contented and relieved.

"Give me your jacket and I'll pour a drink."

I shook my head. "No, I better not stay; I have a busy day ahead of me tomorrow." Then I grinned. "I hope the day won't be as busy as it was today."

"Amen to that," she replied reverently.

She put her arms about my waist and squeezed gently. "Will I see you tonight?"

"Tonight?"

"Sure, today is tomorrow; its past one o'clock."

Then she hurriedly dropped her arms to her side.

"Larry, what have you got in your pocket?"

I put my hand in the indicated pocket and pulled out the .32.

"Gosh, I forgot about that," I said.

She put out her hand. "I have a swell place to hide it, Larry."

Again, I shook my head. "No, kid," I said, "I'll dump this some place far from here. We can't take any chances of having your apartment searched and the gun found on the premises."

"Will you hide it tonight?"

"I'd better wait until morning. Then I'll be clear-headed," I said.

"You won't forget?"

"Cross my heart and hope to die."

I felt pretty glum by now. Maybe things weren't as perfect as I thought they would be. I had slipped up on the gun; I might have slipped up somewhere else along the line.

"Maybe you were right the first time, Gale," I said.

"What do you mean?"

"It might have been better if you had

called the police when you wanted to."

"But Larry, you said—"

I interrupted her, "Yes, I know what I said, but I think that if we tell the police what has happened now before they find Ed, we wouldn't be in as much trouble than if they track us down."

"Then you want to go to the police?"

I nodded my head. "I think that would be best."

"Have you given some thought to Ed's pals and what they might do to us." She was twisting a bit of a lacy handkerchief to shreds.

Again I nodded my head, "That's a chance we'll have to take, Gale."

"Look, Larry. It's close to two o'clock and we've had a hectic day. How about going home now and we can talk this over when we both have had some sleep and our minds will be clearer?"

I told her that was a very good idea and that I could use some sleep and that I would be back at five o'clock for dinner. Then, I kissed her goodnight and went home to my one-room apartment.

I slept the sleep of an innocent child. No nightmarish dreams created by the subconscious mind of a killer; no twisting and turning in bed, praying for daylight. Just good sweet natural sleep induced by a tired body and mind, and a refreshing shower.

THE day promised to be another scorcher. A hot sun in the cloudless morning sky had the heat waves shimmering on the baked sidewalks and streets when I got up at eight.

I put on my new navy blue tropical worsted suit that I was saving for vacation time, and a white porous sport shirt and a blue polka dot tie and black and white shoes, and I was ready to start the day off in good style.

I rode the freight elevator down to

the basement and went to my shed where I kept my samples and literature, and searched around for a hiding place for the .32. A hole in the asbestos covering the heat conduit was my final choice and after carefully wiping off the barrel and butt, I pushed the revolver into the opening.

I picked up a case of Calquent ointment which we were detailing, to replace Calamine lotion, and a bundle of explanatory literature and I locked the door of the shed and walked out of the cool basement into the passageway heading to the baking street. I had left my car parked in front of the building instead of bringing it to the public garage; I wanted to make sure that nobody but myself would drive the car until everything blew over.

A swarthy, scarfaced individual seated in a cream colored Packard roadster parked in back of my Chevvy, his stoney eyes focused fixedly on the entrance to the building, stopped me in my tracks. I was concealed from his view by the brick wall of the adjacent building, but I could watch his every move from the passageway.

I don't know why I had that feeling of apprehension. That fellow was a total stranger, and yet I knew that he was waiting and watching for my appearance and not for anyone else of the some two hundred persons in the same apartment building.

I lost all sense of time, but it must have been over an hour and a half before the Packard drove away and disappeared down the side street. I waited another fifteen minutes and then I got into my car and I drove to my territory on the South Side.

Unanswerable questions were plaguing me. Was he waiting for me, and if he was, why? Was he a pal of Ed Gregorio's and how did he know so soon of Ed's sudden demise? Could he have

been waiting for someone else and was I just being tortured by a guilty conscience?

But one thing was certain: I had to see Gale and convince her that the police should be informed of the whole affair immediately. Either facts or my guilty conscience were bringing things rapidly to a head.

As soon as I reached Dvorak's Pharmacy, my first stop on my territorial route, I called Gale's number but there was no response. I hadn't thought she would get out before noon.

I walked to the prescription counter, located at the rear of the store, and found George Dvorak folding some powders.

"Hello, Larry. Why so late?"

"Had a flat tire, George, and that tied me up. What's on your mind?"

I picked up the want book and checked over the shorts that were listed. It was a pretty good order with a nice representation of specialties that paid off ten percent commission.

"Swell order, George," I said, "but don't forget to call in anything you might need in the next two weeks."

"That reminds me, Larry. If you're going on your vacation, how about taking care of that gallon of Elixir Phenobarbital that was short on last week's delivery?"

"Didn't you get that yet?"

"No, I didn't."

"Can I use your phone, George? I'll call the office now."

"Help yourself." George finished folding the powders and was putting them in a box. Then he stuck a delivery label on the box and called out to the apprentice to deliver the prescription as soon as he finished the display he was making.

called my number.

"Good morning; Acme, Incorporated." Ruth Johnson's voice always did sound pleasant over the phone.

"Good morning, Ruth," I said. "Larry speaking. Any messages?"

"Oh, good morning, Mr. Richland. Yes I have a sort of message for you."

"Let's have it." The words came out automatically. I was leaning on the prescription counter and I was looking through the glass partition and I was staring at a cream-colored Packard roadster that had just parked across the street from the drug store.

"A Mr. Martin called this morning and said that it was urgent that he sees you this morning. So I told him where you were to be up to noon-time."

"Look, Ruth," I said, trying to keep my voice under control, "this guy Martin is a deputy baliff and he wants to subpoena me to be a witness on account of a traffic accident I saw a couple of weeks ago." I forced the words through a narrow, tight constriction in my throat. "If he ever gets hold of me, I'll never get to go on my vacation, so please don't give anyone any more information on my whereabouts."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Richland. I didn't know."

"Okay, Ruth, forget it. Goodbye." I slammed the phone on the hook just in time to intercept the apprentice as he was wrapping the prescription for delivery.

I told him that I was informed by the office that a bailiff was look for me, and that he was waiting outside in that Packard. I gave him the keys to my car and asked him to drive it to the rear of the store, but he was to carry the package and act as if he were making a delivery.

The Packard didn't move as Arnold pulled my car away from the curb and I went out through the rear door after

I PICKED up the phone hanging on the wall of the prescription case and

explaining the situation with the bailiff to George.

As soon as Arnold appeared in the alley, I got in the car and drove around the block until I was on the same side of the street as the Packard; and I waited, about half a block away. I was thinking that this was more than a coincidence and I was determined to learn the identity of my pursuer, but this time we were to reverse roles.

I followed him from Dvorak's Pharmacy to Hall's Prescription Laboratory and to Drayton's Drug Company and finally to the Community Hospital; all on my morning's route. He gave up waiting at the Community Hospital and he drove to 83rd and Forsythe where he parked in front of a large, gray marble front bank and office building. A short, stocky agile man got out of the Packard and disappeared into the lobby of the building. It was no use following him.

I DROVE back to Hall's and tried to call Gale, but again no response. If it hadn't been for my promise to see her at five, I would have made a bee-line to the nearest police station and thrown the whole thing up for grabs. I was plenty scared and worried. But the weak, forlorn sensation in the pit of my stomach wasn't due to fright alone. I was hungry and, after receiving a mediocre order from Frank Hall, I had a sandwich and coke at the restaurant next door.

My day was shot to pieces so far and it was close to two o'clock when I dropped in at the drug room of the Community Hospital. Miss Rita Streit, the pharmacist in charge, handed a slip of paper to me with a notation to call Mr. George Walker, my sales manager."

"When did you get this message, Miss Streit?"

"Just about ten minutes ago. Do you want to use my phone?"

"No, thanks," I said, "I might tie it up too long. I'll call from the booth in the lobby."

I thanked her for the message and for an order for Diphtheria Toxoids and Pertussis Vaccines and went to the lobby.

Ruth Johnson seemed excited when she heard my voice and hastily connected me with the sales manager.

"Where are you now, Larry?" Mr. Walker's voice was very sober.

I told him.

"Get down here as quick as you can," he said. "It's very important."

I said that I would be there in twenty minutes and we hung up.

IN SPITE of the clattering of the typewriters and the billing machines and all the other intricate equipment, the atmosphere in the office was strangely subdued but one could sense the undercurrent of repressed excitement when I made my appearance.

Ruth was at the information desk and she opened the swinging door for me. "Go right in, Mr. Richland." She almost sobbed out the words.

I walked past the row of desks and winked at Blanche Divoret, the pricer. She winked back but her pretty face was serious and showed concern. Compared to the expressions on the office force's various faces, a wake would have had the hilarity associated with a jitterbug contest.

The door to Mr. Walker's private office was closed and I knocked on the frosted plate glass window, and at the invitation to "come on," I turned the knob and opened the door. But I stopped at the threshold for a brief moment.

Mr. Walker was seated behind his oversized mahogany desk placed in the

corner of the room in front of the window. Two quietly dressed but very determined looking men were seated facing Mr. Walker.

"Hello, Larry. Pull up a chair." Mr. Walker's face was pale and drawn. "But first I want you to meet Lieutenants Cooper and Davis of the Homicide Detail. Gentleman, Mr. Laurence Richland."

They rose to their feet and we shook hands. The two officers were about the same build, tall and muscular, and they were dressed in neat, lightweight suits and open collar sport shirts. But it was Cooper that held my attention. His piercing eyes and sharp nose didn't seem to miss a bet.

I barely breathed a polite "how do you do" and I sat down in a stiff backed chair directly in front of the sales manager. Mr. Walker placed his hands before him and rested his elbows on the blotter pad. He thrust his long lean chin forward and his eyes bored into mine. I tried to maintain an innocent "what's this all about" attitude and I nonchalantly picked up a package of cigarettes from the ashtray. I offered it to the policemen and they each took a cigarette and I placed one between my lips and let it dangle.

Suddenly Cooper held a flaming match before my nose and I accepted the proffered light. I was mentally thanking the Navy that taught its men how to be cool, calm and collected in times of extreme danger. This seemed to be one of the times.

"Larry, these gentlemen came to me with an extraordinary request, and after explaining the reason for this request, I had no alternative but to call you in to be questioned. You understand, of course, that you have the right to refuse to answer any question that might incriminate you." Mr. Walker then nodded the go-ahead signal to the

officers.

Lieutenant Cooper was the first to speak.

"Mr. Richland, do you know Ed Gregorio?"

"Personally or by reputation?"

"Personally."

I hesitated. Should I confess now or wait until I talked to Gale? I decided to stall.

"No, I don't."

"Did you ever meet him personally?"

"Yes, I did. But it was some time ago, at a prize-fight."

"Have you seen him recently?"

I shook my head. "No, I didn't."

"Mr. Richland, where were you last night?" Lieutenant Davis drawled out the question.

I DECIDED to do a little bluffing. "Before I answer that question, Lieutenant, what is this all about anyway?" I was surprised that I was able to maintain an easy manner. The beads of perspiration on my forehead could be attributed to the heat, although the air-conditioned office was very comfortable.

"Well . . ." Lieutenant Davis was being very deliberate. He twisted his cigarette around his fingers and he stifled a bored yawn.

"Well," he repeated, "the body of Ed Gregorio was found early this morning in the Sand Dunes. A couple of Indiana road inspectors saw him lying on a seldom-used road out there, and we were asked to help investigate the murder."

"The murder?"

"Yes, it's murder all right. Gregorio was shot between the eyes about seven o'clock last night and apparently the killing was done some place else because we knew that he was alive up to four-thirty and he had, as far as we could ascertain, no business out in the Dunes."

"He was mixed up with a lot of gang doings, wasn't he?" I rubbed the cigarette butt in the ashtray and lit another.

Davis studied me carefully and I had all I could do to control my twitching nerves.

"Whoever killed Gregorio seemed to have that in mind when he disposed of the body, but we don't think that any mob had a finger in this killing for these reasons. First, Gregorio was on his way to Peoria but at the last minute he got off the train. One of our men detailed at the station, watched him get off and he didn't see anyone with him. Therefore, Gregorio's mind was changed on the spur of the moment, and no plans could have been made for his killing except it could have been made by someone who knew him rather intimately. But that conjecture seems to be out due to later developments."

He hesitated and I had a choking feeling around my larynx. I could feel a tight, narrow, but very strong rope around my size 16 neck.

"You see, Mr. Richland, if any mobster wanted to get him, he would have got him off the train through some ruse and that would have to be done through a messenger of some sort. But he was alone at all times until he disappeared and that is one of the reasons we believe that he was not a victim of a gang killing."

"But what have I got to do with all this?"

"We found some pamphlets issued by your company under the body and we figured that when the body was shoved or dragged out of the car, the pamphlets went along with it."

I took a couple of long hard drags on my cigarette and let the smoke filter through my nose and mouth.

"But I still don't see why you picked on me," I said. "After all, Lieutenant,

these pamphlets can be readily obtained in drug stores and in hospitals and even in doctors' offices all over the country."

"That's very true," he answered, "but acting on the idea that the killing was spontaneous and not premeditated, we asked all gas stations from here to Michigan City to report the licenses of all Illinois cars that have purchased gas since five o'clock last night.

"And here is why we did that: due to gas rationing, very few cars maintain a full gas tank at all times, so if the killing was a spontaneous affair, the killer would have to buy gas somewhere along the road. He wouldn't take a chance with a body in the car, so the purchase would have to be made on the way back. After all the round trip would cover about a hundred and fifty miles and he would certainly need gas. Furthermore, the killer wouldn't take a chance with a counterfeit stamp or with the wrong license number because he would want to remain as inconspicuous as possible. And it was these licenses that we were checking on.

"It was a long shot, Mr. Richland, but we are making some headway because your number was reported along with the others."

I LEANED back in my chair and stretched out my legs. All evidence so far was strictly circumstantial and here was where my alibi might work.

"I don't blame you for suspecting me, gentlemen," I said, "but I had nothing to do with the killing." I started to burn my bridges behind me. "You see, I'm going on my vacation next week and I had made reservations at a small resort hotel at Grant Beach. So right after I quit working for the day, I drove out there to get away from the heat and to confirm my reservation.

"I got out there at about seven-thirty, at which time Gregorio was supposed to

be killed in Chicago, and I came back at about one this morning. If you will call the Grant Beach Hotel, I'm sure that the manager will bear me out."

Lieutenant Cooper picked up the phone and asked to be connected to the Grant Beach Hotel. We waited for about five minutes until the connection was completed but in the meantime the tension let down a bit and Mr. Walker began to sign some of the papers in front of him.

Cooper did all the talking to Edith Horliss, and although I couldn't hear both sides of the conversation, the part I did hear was very gratifying indeed. My alibi stuck and the officers appear to be satisfied, at least for the time being.

Davis told me that I could go back to work and not to leave town without notifying the police. We shook hands all around and I went back to my territory. I tried to call Gale again, but she was still out. I was in a beautiful predicament, what with a mean-looking character following me and the police on my trail and Gale missing.

I went to Gale's apartment and leaned on the bell, but she still wasn't home. I began to worry. What if this mysterious guy that followed me all morning got her instead? Then my witness would be missing and the killing could be pinned onto me, and my plea for self-defense would be shot to pieces. I had to find Gale before the police exploded my alibi by questioning Edith personally.

There was only one thing I could do and I did it. I drove to 83rd and Forsythe and parked next to a newspaper stand. I couldn't miss the big black headlines blaring the news of the death of Ed Gregorio. I bought a paper and read the report, but the copy was very meager. It just stated that Gregorio was found shot to death, and

a copper-headed bullet was found in his head, and that the police would make an arrest shortly.

I FOLDED the paper and put it in my jacket pocket. I opened the trunk of the car and filled my cordovan-brown, rough-grained leather detail bag with some samples of our B complex syrup and with some Calquent ointment and with suitable literature and I went into the lobby of the bank-office building. I felt pretty safe since I didn't see the Packard parked anywhere near the building.

The lobby was marble-walled and very cool and very pretentious. I studied the building directory and jotted down the names of the physicians in my note book. But I almost dropped my pencil when right after a listing of United States Government Dept. of Allocation of War Contracts, I noticed the Yvonne Dancing Studio, Room 805. That was the studio in which Gale was a dance instructress.

I picked up my detail bag and rode the elevator to the eighth floor and I walked along the glistening corridor to Room 805. I studied the Spencerian lettering on the translucent glass, then turned the knob and went in.

I walked into a small waiting room, simply and tastefully furnished with a small maple desk and a maple sofa and a few matching chairs and a magazine rack. The canary-yellow shades on the desk- and floor-lamps matched the rug on the floor. There were three doors labeled A, B, and C Studios set in a maple-stained partition that separated the waiting room from the instruction rooms.

"Can I help you?" A cute dark-haired girl with olive skin and flashing black eyes and dazzling white, even teeth was seated behind the desk. She didn't have to stand up to reveal a

curvaceous form. It was very apparent as she sat there.

"Why yes," I said. "I'm representing the Acme Pharmaceutical and Biological Company and I would like to see Dr. Smithers."

"I'm afraid you're in the wrong room. Dr. Smithers is next door."

I put my bag on a chair and sighed. "That's luck for you," I said. "Here I walk into an empty office, no patients waiting and the possibility of a quick detail, and I find that I'm in the wrong room."

"I'm sorry."

"You and me both. Say, what is this office for anyway?"

"It's a dance studio."

I scratched my chin, reflectively. "Do you teach anybody or is it just for kids?"

She laughed. "No children, just adults."

"Are you an instructress?"

She nodded her head.

"Then how about giving me a lesson," I said. "But I've got to warn you first. You see, I got a shrapnel wound in the calf of my leg during the Guadalcanal campaign and the leg gets stiff if I exert it too much. That may make me pretty awkward."

"We can try anyway." She put on her sales voice. "It'll cost a dollar and a half to find out how good or bad you are."

"A bargain in any man's language. When do we start?"

"Right now would be fine. I have an appointment with a student in about thirty-five minutes."

"Let's go."

I was right. She had a figure that would make Grable think twice. She was about five-feet-two and dainty as a Dresden doll; as cool looking in her black and white seersucker dress as a penguin.

STUDIO B was a small bare room with an ancient handwinding phonograph the only piece of furniture on the highly waxed wooden floor. She put a record on the green disk and asked me if I had ever received any instructions. I said no, but that I was a pretty good dancer until I got hit and since then I didn't have any confidence.

We danced to the dreamy, haunting strains of Strauss's *Tales of the Vienna Woods* and she was a very comfortable armful. She spoke in a pleasant but impersonal manner, and she said that I was doing fine until I stumbled against her.

"Oh, I beg your pardon," I said.

"That's quite all right. Shall we continue?"

I shook my head. "No, not right away." I glanced about the room. "No chair?"

She answered very primly. "The vice-squad does not permit any furniture in the instruction rooms."

I sat down on the window sill and began to fan my face with the newspaper I had purchased downstairs.

"It was nice of them to leave the window sill," I said.

She smiled and motioned towards the waiting room. "Perhaps you'll be more comfortable there."

"Wait until this leg loosens up a bit," I said. I spread the paper out next to me. "Here, sit down, I won't bite you or does the ever-present vice squad object to that too?"

But she held out her hand. "Would you mind if I read that article about Gregorio?" There were tears in her eyes.

"Why no, go ahead," and I handed the paper to her.

After a brief interval she returned the paper to me and sat down on the window sill. She covered her small face with the palms of her hands and her

shoulders shook as she silently wept.

"Did you know this Gregorio?" I wondered why anyone would shed a tear for that hoodlum.

She stood up and stared at me with tear-filled eyes. "Are you from the police, if you are, get out of here."

"On the level, Miss whatever-your-name-is, I'm a honorably discharged Navy Corpsman with a wound, and I'm working for a drug firm, and I can show you credentials until the cows come home."

She held out her hand in an impulsive gesture. "I'm sorry I broke out like that but Ed was a swell guy."

I shook hands with her. "My friends call me Bob Raymonds."

"And mine call me Dottie Dunlap, and you don't look like a copper."

I grinned at her. "Gee, t'anks."

"Would you mind," she asked, "if we didn't dance anymore? I'm kind of broken up by the news."

I pulled a pack of cigarettes out of my pocket and we both lit up. She remained standing and she leaned her elbow against the window frame and kept looking thoughtfully out of the window. I kept my seat on the sill.

"Did Gregorio come around here often?" I couldn't see why a swell kid like her would get mixed up with that character.

She studied the column of smoke that circled lazily around her black hair and she stifled a sob.

"Only when Gale worked here, but he would bring presents for all the girls." She dabbed at her eyes with a miniature handkerchief. "But since Gale left and he set her up in her own apartment, we didn't see much of him."

"Gale?"

"Gale Woods and she had the best following of all the girls because she was so beautiful. In fact, when Ed took her away, most of our customers

left with her."

I TOLD her that I didn't understand and she went on to explain that the studio normally had a complement of three girl instructresses; one girl would work the noon to eight shift and the other two would come in at four and work until midnight. In this way all three would be on the job when most of the men from the building would drop in from four to six-thirty.

Some of the men would actually try to dance, but most of them would just talk to the pretty girls and pay a dollar and a half plus a sizeable tip for the privilege. It seemed that Gale would be booked up more than the other girls, and when Ed talked her into leaving, her personal clients never returned. Remo DiCosola, the owner of the chain of four dance studios, wanted Gale to work the afternoon schedule only but Gregorio put a veto to the proposal.

"There is Remo now." We were both standing up, looking out of the window watching the stream of traffic flowing along the shimmering street, eight floors below us. I waited for a door to open, but she pointed down towards Forsythe Street.

"How can you distinguish Remo among all those little bugs down there?" I was frankly amazed at her telescopic eyesight.

She giggled a bit nervously. "Don't be ridiculous. I just saw him park his Packard."

"His Packard?"

"Yes, there it is down there. The cream-colored one."

I flexed my leg and told her that I had better get to detail a couple of more doctors before they start making their afternoon calls, I limped into the waiting room and picked up my detail bag, gave her some money and started to leave when she called me back.

"Forget everything I told you, will you, Bob? I don't want to get mixed up in any inquests."

"You haven't a thing to worry about, Dotty. I've forgotten already."

I walked down a flight of stairs to the seventh floor and I waited near the elevator door and watched the red dots of light indicating the progress of the elevator. When it stopped at eight, I pushed the down button. When I reached the lobby, I didn't waste any time getting out of the building and into my car.

It lacked a few minutes to four when I pulled up in front of Gale's apartment. But this time she was home. She was seated behind a kidney shaped desk when I entered the living room.

"Why, Larry," she said. "I didn't expect you until five."

"Yeah, I know." I threw my hat on an oversize ottoman. "Where were you all day?"

She jerked up her head at the sharp tone to my voice.

"I don't like your attitude, Larry," she said quietly.

"I'm sorry, kid, but so much happened today and I tried to contact you until I almost went nuts."

I put my hands on the back of the delicate desk chair and kissed the nape of her neck.

"Forgive me?"

She nodded. "I'm tired, too. I was shopping and when I saw the papers, I just didn't feel like coming home so I went to the movie."

I WATCHED her for awhile, copying names from some index cards onto a pad of paper.

"What are you doing?"

She sighed and tore a sheet from the pad and put it in her purse. "It looks like I'll have to go back to work, dear, so I'm making a list of some of my steady

customers. I'm going to give them a ring in the morning and tell them that I will be back on the job."

She pushed back her chair and stood up. A pair of cream-colored slacks and a bright yellow floral blouse and nail-studded yellow sport shoes gave her that glamorous cover girl look desired by all females but achieved by so very few.

"It's a bit early for our dinner date, don't you think?" She opened a fresh package of cigarettes and offered it to me. I refused and she put on between her bright red lips and I lit it for her.

"How about making it a bit later, Gale? I have to make a few more calls and I won't be through until six or later."

She blew some perfect smoke rings at the ceiling and began to pace the floor.

"Do you still want to go to the police?"

"I think that would be best," I said. I related my experience with the law and order a few hours ago.

"Okay, Larry." She continued her restless pacing. "I have a late appointment with the beauty parlor for six-thirty and I should be back by eight. Meet me here then, and we'll have a bite and go to the station."

I put my arms around her and kissed her. I said that was fine and that I thought everything would work out for the best. She just shrugged her shoulders and said that she hoped so.

I asked to use the phone and she said to go ahead; she'd mix some drinks in the meantime.

I sat down on the frail chair and dialed a number. When the connection was made I spoke rapidly.

"Mr. Drayton, this is Richland of Acme Pharmaceuticals. I forgot to jot down your narcotic registry number for that gallon of Elixir Terpin Hydrate

with Codeine you ordered. Would it be too much trouble to give it to me now?"

I opened the desk drawer and took out a pad of paper and wrote the number on one of the sheets and put it in my pocket. I thanked Drayton and hung up, and replaced the pad in the desk drawer. A small book fell to the floor and I picked it up and stuck it back under the cover of the bad of paper. It was a bank savings account book and I thought it was a careless place to hide it.

Gale placed a glass in front of me and I drank the cold contents in one gulp. I grabbed my hat and pecked a kiss on her smooth cheek and told her that I'll be back at eight. She just nodded her head and didn't say a word.

I had a lot to do and I worked at full speed to complete my schedule. Now that the end of my mental and physical anguish was in sight, I was more enthused and energetic.

I RETURNED to Gale's apartment about seven-fifteen and waited in the car. She arrived just fifteen minutes later and seemed surprised to see me. I told her that her beauty parlor should hire her as a stooge, she was so beautiful. She smiled and we went up to her apartment.

She said she'd make some cold meat sandwiches and some drinks and we could eat in the kitchen. I went to the kitchen and she disappeared into her bedroom. But she didn't stay in there long, joining me to help with the sandwiches and drinks. She asked me to get her purse in the living room and when I returned we sat down to eat.

The sandwiches hit the spot but after downing the drink, I felt drowsy; I couldn't keep my eyes open.

Gale watched me nervously. "What's wrong, honey?"

"I don't know, Gale, I'm awfully

sleepy."

"Well, lie down on the sofa and rest a few minutes while I clean up the dishes and powder my nose."

I walked drunkenly to the living room and stretched out on the deep cushioned soft. Then I passed out. How long I laid there I never found out; but hard, sharp slaps began to sting my face, and strong arms were pushing and shoving me to stumble about on rubbery legs for a countless number of miles and picked me up as I fell. I was manhandled until I pleaded for mercy. Scorching hot liquids were forced down my throat and I gagged until I was violently sick. Then the thick, soupy, swirling fog that enveloped my head faded gradually until I was able to distinguish a blur of faces. Cold water was splashed over my head and I was permitted to sit down, spent and weary.

"Feeling better, Larry?" The rough masculine voice was strangely familiar.

I couldn't answer. I was choked with the emotion of relief when I recognized the homely and rugged and honest face of Lieutenant Cooper.

I put my hands to my top-heavy head and squeezed to reduce it back to normal size.

"What happened, Lieutenant?" The words bounced over my corrugated tongue like a jeep.

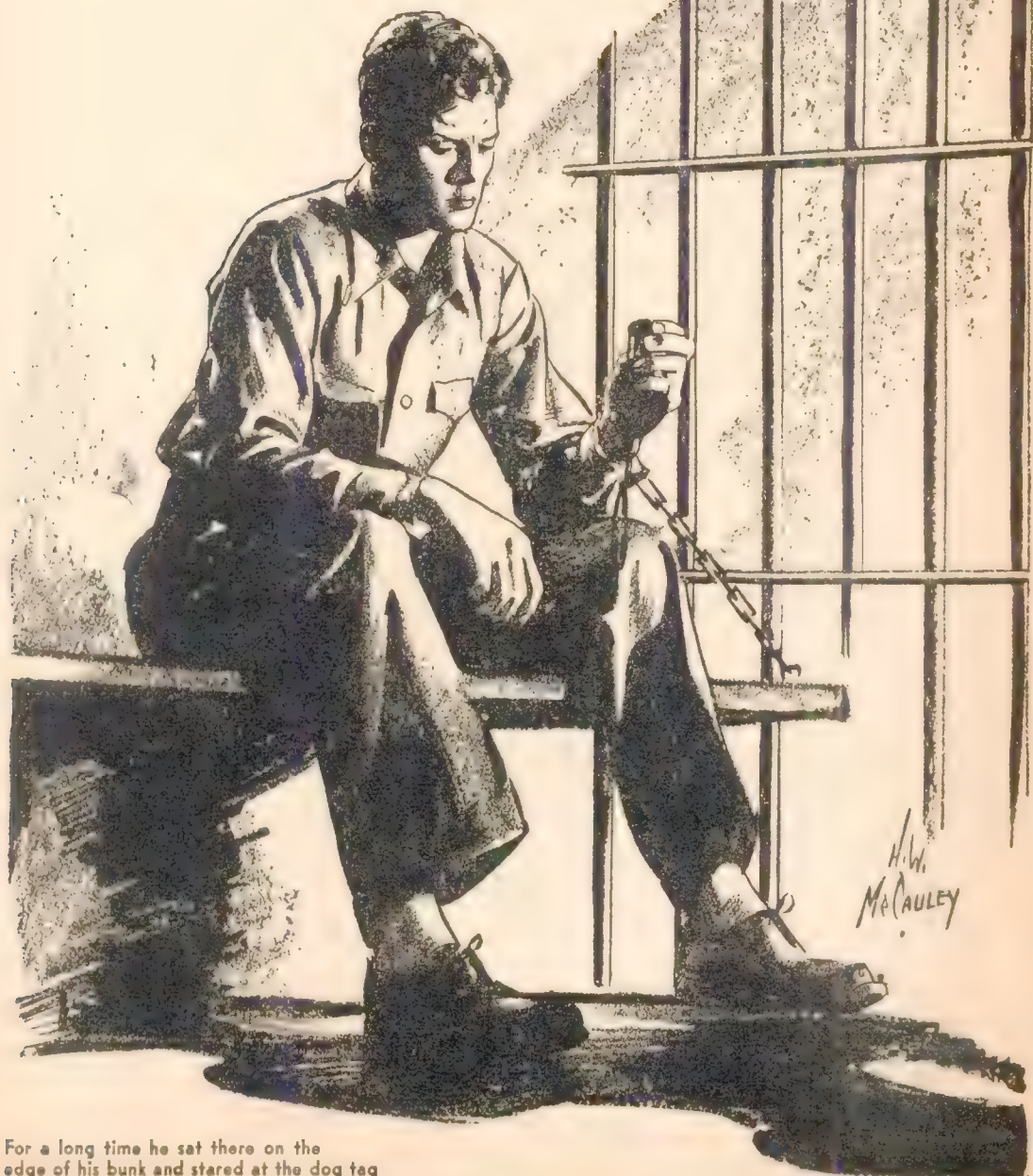
"Somebody must have slipped you a Mickey."

I carefully opened my eyes and the blur of faces began to separate to form distinct shapes. The haze of smoke lifted and I recognized the other faces about me with one or two exceptions. There was Lieutenants Cooper and Davis, and Gale and Inspector Youngman of the FBI and the short stocky individual in the corner, guarded by a behemoth of a man, would be Remo DiCosola.

(Continued on page 172)

Sewer Music

by Mayo Fidler



For a long time he sat there on the edge of his bunk and stared at the dog tag

**Nobody plunges deeper into bitter
hopelessness than a youngster who feels
the entire world has turned against him**

TEDDY just came in to visit me. He tells me Mother called up my boss this morning and said I wouldn't be down there for awhile because I was sick. That was rich. Two hours later the afternoon papers carried the story. The boss probably got a big kick out of that. Here mom says I'm sick and the papers say I'm in jail for forgery.

Well, maybe she's right. I am sick. But it's not the flu or the strep or any kind of sickness like that. It's inside me, and right now I feel worse than if the doc had told me I had spinal meningitis.

Teddy says Dad will be in to see me this afternoon. He's been at the City Hall all morning trying to get me out on bail. But they're holding me on an open charge, without bail. Even with all the big shots he knows it isn't going to do any more good than if I was a foreigner just over on steerage peddling fruit without a license.

I told him not to let Mom in here. It's not that I don't want to see her, it's just that I can't. Even facing Dad makes me feel like a sack of cement inside. With Ted it's okay. Brothers are like the same people. Right now he's kicking himself in the pants for letting me get mixed up with that two-bit crowd.

We just sit and he doesn't say anything. So every little while I try to tell him how it is. The papers are playing it up big because it's the first time a couple of vets really pulled something. That is, we tried to. But I guess all we pulled was a boner.

And Monday we go up before the

judge on God knows how many counts. Twenty-five thousand dollars in forged checks, forged Social Security cards, forged draft classifications, forged signatures of two big business men, and assault and battery charged by a police officer in attempting to perform his duty.

That should be enough to hold me through ten subscriptions of the Book of the Month club. It's going to cost Dad everything he's got for the lawyer. Ted says he's getting this guy, Mason. He's rated in the Criminal Courts like a B-29 is in the air.

If I thought getting up the nerve to go into this stunt was something, I didn't count on the amount of guts it was going to take afterwards facing my family. I feel worse than if I had seen my name posted on the bulletin board for tomorrow's raid on Schweinhurst back there in '43.

This isn't like an AWOL charge before the Commanding Officer; it isn't going to be one week restriction or extra duty. It's going to mean 5 to 10 in Statesville if that black-robed senator nods his head in the affirmative.

Or do they still wear black robes?

Teddy grins when I joke about it. That's a joke, son, that is. I slap him on the back and imitate this guy Clag-horn on Fred Allen's show. Right after it comes out it turns as stale as last week's baking powder rolls. I feel lousier every minute. That's because I think about it. They used to tell us over there not to think about the raids. The characters who told us this were ground operations officers. And the funny part is we *weren't* thinking about

it until they mentioned it.

WHEN Ted came in I was asleep.

I was dreaming about this girl I ran around with in Albuquerque. It must have shocked him to find me that way, asleep and like I didn't give a damn. I couldn't say anything. He wouldn't understand that part. I mean about looking so calm and nonchalant. We used to sleep on the way in to the target. It was the best way to keep your mind off what you were doing. If we thought about it we'd go nuts.

I can't tell this to Ted because he wasn't over there. If he was even *in* I wouldn't have to say anything. But he wasn't, so I grin and remember and look sad and sit on the iron tier with my face in my hands and don't say much.

The cop says it's time for Ted to blow. Before he leaves he asks me if I need anything. I look through the bars and say, yeah, some cigarettes and a saw. The cop laughs at this. He was a vet too. Who the hell wasn't? The punks in high school are wearing the discharge button. I saw a little girl with her old man's Good Conduct Medal pinned to her sweater. What a laugh. The old man spends a year being a good boy and the kid wears the medal when a hair brush would be more in style.

But that's the way things are, as we used to say when a ship didn't come back. I think I would have been far better off if we had caught an '88 in the wing. That way, I would have been a hero. I'd like to see the face of this broad in Albuquerque now. She

wouldn't come any closer to me than if I had leprosy.

Ted left me a pack of smokes. I've been sitting on his dehydrated slab of iron watching how the smoke curls up to the ceiling. Been doing a little thinking too. The hell with the lawyer. I got as much chance of beating this rap as a petty larceny boy pilfering the church soliciting fund. I figure my time should have been up two years ago over there. Twenty-five raids and not a scratch. That's too good. My GI insurance had it too easy. What's there to think about anyway? I'm up the creek without a paddle.

This sitting here smoking gives me the jumps. Couple more minutes of this and I'll be flak happy. I unbutton my shirt collar and finger my dog tags. I still wear them. I guess it's a habit four years couldn't break. There's rubber capping all around them. That's so they don't make noise clanging together. I took the capping off over there and sharpened the end on a grind stone and then put the capping back on. It's like a razor. I figured if we were ever forced down and things got too rough with the Heinies I could make good use of them.

I got the end cell. There's nobody in the one across from me. The cop's down gabbing with the sergeant at the desk. I take the dog tags off and remove the capping. There's a fuzz on my throat from not shaving. I feel around and rub my Adam's apple. When I put the dog tag over it it jumps up and down.

Like it's got a feeling I'm going to cut my throat.

THE END

NEXT MONTH!




"SHADOW FOR A LADY"



BY

WILLIAM P. MCGIVERN



In Your Mind's Eye

The Secret of MENTAL CREATING

IF you just like to dream, read no further. There comes a time when your fancies *must be* brought into light—and stand the test of every-day, hard realities. Are you one of the thousands—perhaps millions—whose thoughts never get beyond the stage of *wistful wishing*? Do you often come to from a daydream with the sigh, “If only I could bring it about—*make it real*?”

All things begin with thought—it is what follows that may take your life out of the class of those who hope and dream. Thought energy, like anything else, can be dissipated—or it can be made to produce actual effects. *If you know how to place your thoughts* you can stimulate the creative processes within your mind—through them you can assemble things and conditions of your world into a happy life of accomplishment. *Mental creating* does not depend upon a magical process. It consists of *knowing how* to marshal your thoughts into a power that draws, compels and organizes your experiences into a worth-while design of living.

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Let the Rosicrucians tell you how you may accomplish these things. The Rosicrucians (not a religious organization), a world-wide philosophical fraternity, have preserved for centuries the ancients' masterful knowledge of the functioning of the inner mind of man. They have taught men and women how to use this knowledge to *recreate their lives*. They offer you a free copy of the fascinating book, “The Mastery of Life.” It tells how you may receive this information for study and use. Use coupon opposite.

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and I shall read it as directed.

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THE MURDEROUS SCHOOLMASTER

By
JUNE LURIE

EUGENE ARAM began and ended his life in the small town of Knaresborough, England, and his beginning and end were quite different. Aram became a highly esteemed schoolmaster in the town, but ended his life as a murderer, hung in chains on public view.

Although the good citizens of Knaresborough entrusted their children to the teachings of Aram, his treatment towards his wife and the career of crime which he later led would have shocked many of them into a fearful stupor for having placed their faith in him from the very beginning.

Early in 1744, another citizen, Daniel Clarke, in preparation for his coming marriage, procured considerable merchandise and jewelry and money from a local tradesman. Clarke was among Aram's most intimate companions. Another was a Richard Houseman, who was the town's flax dresser.

It would seem natural, therefore, that Houseman and Aram were approached by the local constabulary when their friend, Clarke, disappeared with his loans on the night of February 7th. The town was shocked to learn that Aram's house was searched and that some of the missing goods were found buried in the schoolmaster's garden. Houseman's home was also searched in vain.

Knaresborough police concentrated all their attention upon Aram when Aram, known to be a man of small financial means, produced a sizable sum. The schoolteacher was immediately suspected of harboring some information regarding Clarke's disappearance but due to lack of evidence, the charge was dismissed. Aram's actions were not forgotten.

The following April, Aram abandoned his wife and children and, according to the town gossip, was said to have gone to London where, in February, 1758, he received an appointment as usher in the Lynn grammar school. After this date, events started happening fast.

A laborer, digging on a hill overlooking Knaresborough, uncovered a human skeleton. Local police immediately connected the discovery with the strange disappearance of Clarke, fourteen years before. Their suspicions were soon confirmed by a coroner's jury who made positive identification of the skeleton and made the important addition that Clarke had been murdered. The jury strengthened their convictions when Aram's wife testified that on the same night of Clarke's disappearance, he (Clarke) and Houseman had been with Aram in the latter's house and after the three departed, only Aram and Houseman returned. She volunteered to express her belief that Clarke had been murdered by her husband and Houseman.

HOUSEMAN'S arrest soon followed and although, at first, he denied his guilt, he later

signed a confession accusing Aram of the evil deed of murdering Clarke at the entrance of St. Robert's cave. Houseman also added that he had been a witness of the murder. The jury was quick to name Aram and Houseman as the positive murderers of Clarke.

His Lynn schoolroom was the scene of Aram's arrest. Like Houseman, this new defendant denied every accusation and even denied any acquaintance with Clarke or Houseman. After he was recognized by the Knaresborough constable, he readily retracted his denials of guilt in the case. He finally signed a confession in which he admitted his participation in Clarke's fraud but still insisted he knew nothing of his murder.

At the trial of the two men a year later, the jury returned a verdict of not guilty in the charge against Houseman since the accomplice had turned King's evidence. Houseman described the entire murder scene. He stated that he had been with Clarke at Aram's house on February 8 and that they did leave the house when Aram asked them to accompany him a short way. Houseman saw Aram and Clarke stop at St. Robert's cave where Aram struck Clarke and Clarke fell to the ground. Aram confessed to Houseman that he had actually killed Clarke and described the exact spot where he had buried his victim. Houseman also revealed the fact that he was afraid to report this information to the police because of Aram's threats of injury to him.

The jury heard a number of witnesses who were well acquainted with both Houseman and Aram offer some damaging evidence against the two men, but most of their testimony implicated Aram as the fiendish murderer of Clarke. One after another, they testified that Aram's suspicious actions at the time of his arrest and his strange disappearance when the Clarke's fraud case came to the attention of the police, surely made him the definite murderer.

William Tuton, the Knaresborough's mason, disclosed the fact that his pick and hammer which he was missing, was later found in Aram's house. This bit of testimony later assumed more significance when medical experts stated that Clarke's skull showed a fracture which was produced before his murder and which was caused by a heavy blow from a blunt instrument such as the mason's hammer. Stephen Latham, the arresting officer, took the stand and testified that Aram made many contradictory and suspicious statements when arrested. This evidence seemed conclusive enough to send Aram straightway to the hangman's noose, but Aram turned out to be a vain fighter and insisted upon conducting his own defense.

Aram centered his defense on the lack of posi-

(Concluded on page 170)

How Do You Know You Can't Write?



Had Never Written a Line Sells Article Before Completing Course

"Before completing the N.I.A. course, I sold a feature to Screenland Magazine for \$50. That resulted in an immediate assignment to do another for the same magazine. After gaining confidence with successive feature stories, I am now working into the fiction field. Previous to enrolling in N.I.A., I had never written a line for publication, nor seriously expected to do so."—Gene E. Levant, 116 West Ave. 28, Los Angeles, Cal.



Wins Writing Success after Two Months' Training

"After only two months of N.I.A. training, I became a reporter on the Columbus Enquirer. In four months I have had two raises. Also I have over 75 'by-lines' to my credit, and the prospects of becoming City Editor look very promising."—Marion M. Blondel, Columbus, Georgia.

Have you ever tried?

Have you ever attempted even the least bit of training, under competent guidance?

Or have you been sitting back, as it is so easy to do, waiting for the day to come when you will awaken, all of a sudden, to the discovery "I am a writer"?

If the latter course is the one of your choosing, you probably *never will write*. Lawyers must be law clerks. Doctors must be internes. Engineers must be draftsmen. We all know that, in our time, the egg does come before the chicken.

It is seldom that anyone becomes a writer until he (or she) has been writing for some time. That is why so many authors and writers spring up out of the newspaper business. The day-to-day necessity of writing—of gathering material about which to write—develops their talent, their insight, their background and their confidence as nothing else could.

That is why the Newspaper Institute of America bases its writing instruction on journalism—continuous writing—the training that has produced so many successful authors.

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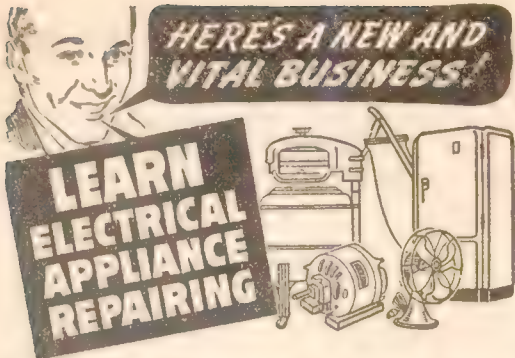
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The MURDEROUS SCHOOLMASTER

(Concluded from page 168)

tive proof that the body found at St. Robert's Cave was definitely that of Daniel Clarke. With eloquent phrases and demonstrative dramatics, Aram tried to show that human skeletons and bones are often found in caves and are apt to be fossils or the like. Ironically enough, Aram had hit upon a controversial point, for even the coroner's jury which viewed and identified the body had, previous to their final decision, passed upon two skeletons and pronounced each of them to be Clarke's.

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AMONG the streets of infamy in the world, probably the name of "Little Water" of New York will be remembered longest. Short and narrow in appearance, the street ended in an alleyway. This was known as Cow Bay, for it had formerly been the site of a small stream that watered cows. Thirty feet at its widest point this alley extended about a hundred feet.

But within these narrow confines existed a miserable mass of criminal humanity. Filthy and horribly overcrowded, tenements from one to five stories high stood on unstable foundations at either side of the ever-muddy alley. The buildings were connected by a series of dark and frightening underground passageways, and here were committed the most nefarious of crimes.

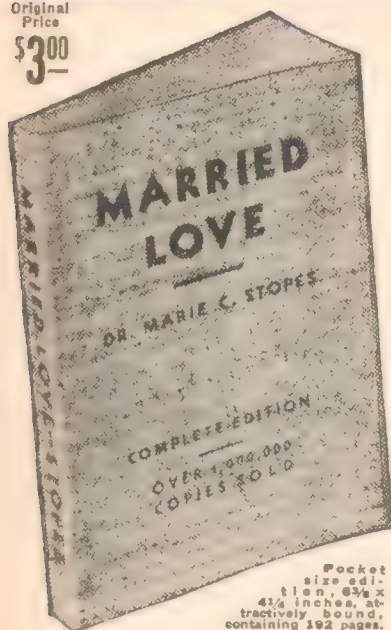
Robberies, murders, violence of every sort did a thriving business underground. Yet the police, in fear of their own lives, seldom ventured near Little Water. And the innocent passerby in that infamous street rarely got out alive. Even the bodies of the dead were infrequently recovered, for murder victims in Little Water were buried where they died.

The buildings acquired names such as Gates of Hell, Brick Bat Mansion, and Jacob's Ladder. This last was so called because it could only be reached by climbing a long and dangerous stairway on the outside of the building.

Long after other criminal sections of New York had been reorganized and placed under police control, Little Water clung to its evil character, and it was many years before it, too, was forced to recognize the pressure of law and order.

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MURDER MAKES ME MAD

(Continued from page 163)

I was seated on the same sofa in the long living room and Gale was standing near her desk, her frightened eyes avoiding mine. The lieutenants were sitting on both sides of me and Captain Youngman was standing directly in front of me, legs wide apart and his arms akimbo.

I grinned at him. "Glad to see you, Captain."

He returned the grin and motioned for someone to bring a chair. He sat down, carefully crossing his legs so as to avoid wrinkling the razor-edge crease in his dark blue slacks.

"Drink or smoke?" he asked.

"I could use a smoke," I said.

I selected a cigarette from a thin sterling silver case and lit it from a matching lighter. I inhaled deeply and felt better.

"Feel like explaining things now, Larry?" Lieutenant Cooper began to show signs of impatience.

I TRIED to stifle a yawn, but it was beyond control and I almost threw my jaw out of place. "I'll do the best I can, gentlemen," I said, "but please don't interrupt me."

The officers nodded their heads in agreement and I asked Gale to sit down. She did.

"Gentlemen, I'm going to clear up the killing of Ed Gregorio as I promised to do late this afternoon. I called Captain Youngman in because it was with the aid of the FBI that I was able to fit the loose strings together."

I turned and directed my next remarks to Gale. She couldn't look straight at me but kept looking at the floor.

"Gale," I said, "when I picked you up yesterday afternoon, you had all the intentions in the world of saying good-bye to Ed Gregorio. But when you arrived at the station on time, you saw him waiting for you and he had a jealous expression on his face. That gave you an idea and you hid yourself from his sight.

"You watched him and when he left the station after the train left fifteen minutes late, you ran to the parking lot and told me that you missed the train."

I lit another cigarette and asked for some cold water. My throat felt furry and parched and constricted. I still felt weak and dizzy and my thoughts and speech didn't unite in their efforts for expression. The room was tense and smoky and hot and all the men had loosened their collars and ties and Lieutenant Cooper was fanning his face with a magazine.

"You see, Gale, when I was driving Ed's body to the Dunes, a radio commentator said something about a train, making up lost time, having hit a truck and killing two men near Joliet. A train bound for Peoria would pass through Joliet and when I checked with the railroad this afternoon, I was informed that this particular train was late in starting.

"While we were driving to the Lake View Inn you were formulating your plans and when we arrived, you made a phone call. You called Remo DiCosola at one of the studios, and you told him of your plans and he agreed. As close as I can figure it out your ideas ran along these lines:

"Ed did not have his car and since cabs were almost impossible to get, he would have to rely for the most part on either the street cars or the El. This gave DiCosola time to get to your apartment, admit himself with one of your keys that the janitor keeps in

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stock, and conceal himself in your bedroom.

“DiCosola planted the revolver in the bar compartment so that it would fall out at the slightest touch. He then arranged the cocktail tables and coffee tables and whatnots so that there would be a clear space only in front of the bedroom door. I noticed that you had rearranged the furniture when I returned from Indiana.

“Remo ignored the phone that was constantly ringing. That was left for me. When we arrived at your apartment, the phone was ringing and you were furious when you didn't have the key and you hoped that Ed would call back and he did. You delayed in taking your shower until the phone rang again and I answered it. You knew that when Ed heard a man's voice, he would come right over. So you dressed in the briefest of clothing to arouse him to a fighting fury.

“The fight, if we can call it that, was directly in front of your bedroom door and Remo waited for his opportunity which came when I was hit and sat down in front of the door. It was slightly opened when I fell against it, but at the moment I wasn't thinking about it.

“You handed the planted gun to me when Ed was going to kick me, and when I raised my arm to ward off the kick, my gun and Remo's gun went off at the same time. But it was Remo's shot that did the killing.

“When I passed out, Remo stepped over me and tried to pull my revolver out of my hand and substitute his. But I had a tight grip and he was unable to do a thing with me. I remembered my arm being pulled at the time but that was all.”

I ASKED for more water and I drank about two glasses of the cooling

fluid.

"I started to come to," I continued, "and you told DiCosola to leave and that you would handle the situation somehow. Remo took his gun with him, but he brought it back. That explained the doors opening and closing that bothered me at the time. You had intended to substitute guns but I held onto mine and again it was no go.

"You were bluffing when you attempted to call the police because you happened to remember that I had done some amateur fighting at one time and perhaps I would recognize the dead man. I did.

"Everything was all right until you discovered that I had forgotten to dispose of the revolver and had developed a case of cold feet and wanted to go to the police. You stalled because the police would take the gun and eventually tell me it wasn't the one used in killing Gregorio. Therefore I had to be stopped. You called Remo and told him where I lived and for whom I worked. Remo, fortunately for me, did not know what kind of a car I was driving so that upset his plans to kill me. Instead of him following me, I followed right along behind him.

"I followed him to a bank building on 83rd and Forsythe, but I didn't go in because at the moment it would be a hopeless procedure. But after I was called into the office and confronted by the police, I was unable to get in touch with you. So I had no alternative but to investigate that bank building."

This was the time to pause and be dramatic and the effect was terrific. Gale had her head on the desk and she was crying; Remo was trying to tell his guards that I was a liar and he would break my neck if they would give him the chance; Cooper was saying "go on, go on," in an impatient manner; and Captain Youngman kept rubbing the

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crease of his trousers between his fingers.

I said: "It was a good thing for me that I did go into that building for it was there I discovered that I did not kill Gregorio. Using my detail work as a pretext for getting into the Yvonne Dancing Studio, I talked to one of the instructresses there and it was a stroke of good luck when she recognized Ed Gregorio's picture in a newspaper I was carrying. It was then, Gale, that I knew I didn't kill Ed.

"Remember, Gale, when you had told me that your boy friend was a traveling salesman by the name of Ed Krueger? And now I discover that everyone in the studio knew him as Ed Gregorio. The girl told me other interesting things and I went back to your apartment.

"Even though I was sure I hadn't killed Ed, I didn't have conclusive proof. The gun I had concealed in the basement wouldn't mean a thing to the police because I had lied to them before. I had to force the issue and I did when I saw you at four this afternoon. You were copying the names of some of your former customers on a pad of paper. After what I had learned up at the studio, I wanted those names.

"SO I called one of my customers and copied some information on another sheet of paper and when I did that, a savings deposit book fell to the floor. I had a glimpse of its contents before I replaced it in the pad in the drawer. A deposit of two thousand dollars was made this afternoon by you, Gale, which represented your reward for getting rid of Gregorio. You have a habit of losing keys so you wouldn't take a safety deposit box and you didn't want the money around the apartment, so you deposited it.

"After I left you, I went to Lieutenants Davis and Cooper and told them

my story and they took me to Captain Youngman of the FBI. There they traced out the names of the men you had copied and they made a few phone calls. These men were working for the United States Government Department of Allocations of War Contracts located in the same building with the studio. And it was these men who had been giving you very important information which you passed along to Remo here.

"Remo made a nice bit of change with the information you got from the men who would rather talk than dance; but this lucrative windfall came to an end when Gregorio took you away and wouldn't let you go back to work. The jealous nature of Ed's and the boring existence you were leading made you a willing accomplice when Remo gave you a proposition and that was to get rid of Ed.

"Your opportunity came yesterday when you met me, but I was about to upset the apple cart and I was to be disposed of too. You asked me to be back at five o'clock and you had arranged for Remo to carry to me out after you slipped me a Mickey Finn. No shooting this time. Then Remo would plant the gun on me after shooting me out in the country somewhere, and the case would be solved. A killer committing suicide.

"But I came back at four, so you had to rearrange the time for Remo to show up and that was to be about seven to seven-thirty. I waited for you to go to the beauty parlor and I asked the janitor for all the keys to your apartment. I told him you were having your lock changed.

"Then I waited for you and you slipped me the knockout drops even though Remo wasn't hiding in the bedroom. But when Remo did show up, he was escorted by the police and they

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arrested him and you too."

I turned to Captain Youngman. "Did you find a .32 with copper-headed bullets on him?"

Captain Youngman showed the revolver to me and it was identical with the one Cooper held in his hand. "That's the killer's weapon, Larry," he said. "But tell me; what made you say that, after you discovered that Gale had lied to you, you knew you didn't kill Gregorio?"

I lifted my right arm and held it straight out. "You see, gentlemen, it is impossible for me to raise this arm any higher than shoulder level. In order for me to shoot Gregorio in the forehead, I would have to be standing on a platform of some sort or he would have to be in a semi-crouch with me standing up straight. As it was, I was sitting on the floor and my shot would either hit him in the groin or hit the wall. It hit the wall and the hole is covered by that barrel chair across the room."

I made an effort to stand up. Davis supported me and I walked over to where Gale was sitting. "You remember you told me that you didn't like my attitude this afternoon? Well, that attitude was due to the fact that you tried to pin murder on me. That made me mad."

THE END

YOU SMOKE TOO MUCH

(Concluded from page 111)

will take care of."

"At any rate," Meers told him, "I gave you quite a build-up in the paper. Of course, it was pretty hard to make you out a mastersleuth, but I did the best I could."

"Hard! How do you get that way?" Gellet demanded. "I want you to know that it took real brains to pin that murder on the right man!"

THE END



Let your HEAD take you

(The average American today has a choice of just going where "his feet take him", or choosing wisely the course to follow. Let's skip ahead 10 years, and take a look at John Jones—and listen to him . . .)

"SOMETIMES I feel so good it almost scares me.

"This house—I wouldn't swap a shingle off its roof for any other house on earth. This little valley, with the pond down in the hollow at the back, is the spot I like best in all the world.

"And they're mine. I own 'em. Nobody can take 'em away from me.

"I've got a little money coming in, regularly. Not much—but enough. And I tell you, when you can go to bed every night with nothing on your mind except the fun you're going to have tomorrow—that's as near Heaven as man gets on this earth!

"It wasn't always so.

"Back in '46—that was right after the war and sometimes the going wasn't too easy—I needed cash. Taxes were tough,

and then Ellen got sick. Like almost everybody else, I was buying Bonds through the Payroll Plan—and I figured on cashing some of them in. But sick as she was, it was Ellen who talked me out of it.

"Don't do it, John!" she said. 'Please don't! For the first time in our lives, we're really saving money. It's wonderful to know that every single payday we have more money put aside! John, if we can only keep up this saving, think what it can mean! Maybe someday you won't have to work. Maybe we can own a home. And oh, how good it would feel to know that we need never worry about money when we're old!"

"Well, even after she got better, I stayed away from the weekly poker game—quit dropping a little cash at the hot spots now and then—gave up some of the things a man feels he has a right to. We didn't have as much fun for a while but we paid our taxes and the doctor and—we didn't touch the Bonds.

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